

# Humanizing hughes' bestiary



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Ted Hughes is a significant modern poet. His poems about animals are among his best. He once revealed: "...my interest in animals began when I began." <sup>1</sup> The landscape of Yorkshire moor where Hughes spent most receptive years of his youth, and where he used to hunt small game with his brother, turned him an avid observer of the natural world. In his picture of natural life wild animals and birds have unusual importance and prominence. They appear frequently throughout his work as deity, metaphor, persona and icon. The first volume of his poetry contains poems like-" The Hawk in the Rain", " The Thought Fox", " The Jaguar" and in the second volume we have " Hawk Roosting", " Thrushes", " An Otter". In these poems he stresses the vitality and vehemence of the animals. The animals possess the natural sufficiency denied to men. Hughes's hawk, in " Hawk Roosting", for instance, retains all its predatory qualities and symbolizes the Darwinian aspect of Nature, which is Nature " red in tooth and claw" <sup>2</sup>. In " Pike", Hughes describes the physical structure and the violent nature of the pike fish. He describes the fish as ' perfect'. The word ' perfect', at least in the corporeal shape, best suits human beings. " Hawk in the Rain" reflects Hughes's primary ideals. The supremacy of animals over man because of their inability to understand death, just like J. M. Coetzee mentions in his essay " The Lives of Animals" <sup>3</sup>, how man and animals treat the idea of death differently, since they reason differently. The section ' Poets and Animals', in the essay bodies forth the jaguar in Hughes's " The Jaguar" where the protagonist, Elizabeth Costello says- " Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals - by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will." The horses, in the poem ' The Horses' have been described as patient and passive, while the wolves in ' <https://assignbuster.com/humanizing-hughes-bestiary/>

The Howling of Wolves' are depicted as victims of human cruelty. The figure of the animal has interested Hughes greatly in almost all of the poetry he produced. This has been commented on by many critics, including foremost Hong Chen, Terry Gifford, Keith Sagar and Leonard M. Scigaj . Hughes's interest in non-human animals that he recognizes as entities that are curious, sensitive, vulnerable, predatory, terrifying and huge as humans - supports the post humanist argument that humans are essentially more significant, distinct, refined or knowledgeable than other species. With regard to the belief that human intelligence can be clearly separated out from non-human intelligence, Hughes uses sight, which has a long history in Western philosophy as a metaphor for pure, objective or unbiased perspective, according to Iris Ralph. Hughes's sustained and profound interest in the subject of the animal invites an approach informed by animal studies. Initially a " smattering of work in various fields on human-animal relations and their representation 5" within both the arts and sciences, animal studies are now a disciplinary area in its own right. Critical Animal Studies, in order to differentiate it from the older term and area of study known simply as ' animal studies' , it is deeply politicizing human practices involving animals. The use of animals for sports and entertainment, trading , keeping as pets are several areas that have ignited probing and criticism. Another area, one with which Hughes engages in the collection ' Moortown Diary', is the traditional farming of animals. Since the publication of Hughes's first poetry collection " The Hawk in the Rain," scholars writing on his animal poems have done so in terms - that betray a humanist mode of intellectual examination. The second kind of thinking - a posthumanist mode of intellectual examination, forms the basis of Hughes's work which is aimed at

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broadening critical approaches to Hughes. Posthumanist animal scholar Cary Wolfe examines Hughes's poetry as two courses of posthumanism - 'posthumanist posthumanism' and 'humanist posthumanism'. A diverse set of humanist posthumanist point of view - one that is more applicable to studying the poetry of Hughes, portrays many of the debates about distinctions between humans and non-humans. The spotlight here is on where the human stops being a non-human animal and on the moral implications of treating animals as if they are not animals. The essay titled "A Cyborg Manifesto" by Donna Haraway might be used here to represent this second kind of humanist posthumanism, in which few of the major topics are - the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, animal-human and machine, blurred lines in the human-animal relationship with evolution and so on. Haraway's cyborg theory proposes a chimeric, monstrous world of fusions between animal and machine. While the study of cybernetics might not have interested Hughes especially and her writing may not have been known to Hughes, both ought to have a brief mention, for they fall into the group of posthumanist inquiries and they have been used to support rights for nonhuman animals, which do relate to Hughes and to the extraordinary number of poems he dedicates to the other-than-human animal species. One way of achieving such insight is by taking a shamanistic approach to thinking and writing about animals for Hughes the poet. Hughes explains his very old interest in shamanism and the role of animals in it in one of his letters to Moelwyn Merchant in 1990. He said that it was actually shamanism that had helped him see the connection between 'everything that concerned (him)', such as his 'preoccupation with animal life', his mythologies and a series of his recurring dreams. Beneath them all, what he found was a "deeper

connection between animal life and the divine world - where humans are separated from". Hughes portrays the picture of modern man, proud of his achievements, but totally at odds from communion with his race and from the world he seems to dominate in the poem ' Crow'. The dominating crow, much like the hawk in ' Hawk Roosting' is almost Hitler-like in its dominating nature. It also strikes a contrast to the raven in Edgar Allan Poe's ' The Raven', who follows the narrator, is a non-reasoning creature, far from being dominating. 9 " Crow is Everyman who will not acknowledge that hates and fears everything within and around him", according to Caroline and Sagar. The reader may also agree to what Neil Roberts points to Hughes's insistence that ' Crow' should not be seen as belonging to the modern genre of Absurdist Black Comedy, but rather as an attempt to produce a new form of ancient folkloric of the Trickster tale." Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn, / More coiled steel than living"- the famous description of thrushes in ' The Thrushes' portrays a common garden bird as mysterious, mechanical and menacing would not have been incompatible in Jean Paul Sartre's ' La Nausee' , one of the existentialist and absurdist novels that were highly fashionable in the early 1960's, although Hughes's work is undoubtedly influenced by a conservative nature-writing tradition, in the view of critic Richard Kerridge. The reader might also agree to what Kerridge further observes that a fundamental distinction between his own vision and absurdism was later drawn by Hughes. Reviewing the Yugoslav poet Vasko Popa , he declared that Popa , and several other Eastern European poets, were able to express in their work a vision of elemental life, death and contingency ' which for artists elsewhere is a prevailing shape of things but only brokenly glimpsed , through the clutter of our civilized liberal confusion.'

These were poets ' caught in mid-adolescence by the war.' Popa was a concentration camp survivor. For Hughes, they were ' among the purest and most wide awake of living poets', and their vision reminded him of Samuel Beckett's. But still Hughes found in them something positively diverse. Hughes wants a writing " as intent as Beckett's on taking a large disillusioned view of life's possibility, temporality, materiality and mortality and on finding modern symbolic and modern forms capable of being archetypal yet intensely personal". But he wants a vision less simple and fatal and more open to passion unguarded by irony, than he is able to find in Beckett's ironic pity. Keith Sagar argues that Hughes was discarding a vision ' traditional from the Greeks to Eliot and Beckett.' - the idea ' that death owns everything' , ' that nothing which does not last forever is of real value, that the achievements of man are mocked by time and cancelled by death.'

The student of literature might feel that Hughes is drawing a contrast between the position of a separated, sarcastic spectator of a strange world, and an eager contributor in that world, a struggler for life, which is also supported by Neil Roberts. A distinctive example of Hughes's animalizing imagination is " The Thought Fox". The creative eyes of the working poet look through the window into the midnight forest. A sense of movement outside in the darkness pierces the lonely heart, and the actual fox combines with the one in the poet's memory, at the point where the eye appears as " A widening deepening greenness". When these fuse to leap onto the pages by the way of " dark hole in the head", the usual borders between different worlds disintegrate, and the ' triple transformation' is made. Reproduction of the fox's watchfulness is apparent in the rhythm of the lines - " Two eyes serve a movement, and now/ And again now, and now and now." In this way,

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the fox - for it is also being the thought-fox as well as the fox in the text is a totem or shamanic animal with the authority to move unreservedly out of its own corporeal existence into the spiritual or mythic territory at the same time as corresponded as a textual force from beyond, yet obviously articulated within human culture. But the move between the different realms might not be as easy or impulsive as it appears. Richard Webster identified a 'conflict of sensibility' in the poem, a tension between 'the extraordinary sensuous delicacy' of the fox image and 'the predatory impulse' which he sees in the poet's attempt to capture the animal in the process of poetic creation by having the feminine sensuality of the poem 'purified by, or subordinated to a tough, rational, artistic will.' Influenced by Jung, Hughes felt deeply about 'the separation of the two psychic halves' and regarded it as a basic human condition in which every human being, including himself was drawn in. Whether influenced or not by Jung's stress on the importance of symbols as the third ground for the meeting of the two polarized halves, Hughes tried to use animal totems to join the two though his attempt, maybe, according to the reader, did not seem to be very successful at this stage. Hughes evokes the mysterious workings of life-sustaining energy stored in the bodies of powerful animals. In the title poem, "Hawk in the Rain", descriptions of the hawk suggest that the animal power is internalized into what might resemble the will power of human beings or even mythologized into a kind of universal energy when the hawk becomes 'the master - /Fulcrum of violence'. The jaguar is another creature in Hughes's poetry like the hawk which is full of energy, and powerful enough to mesmerize the watching crowd at the zoo. Facing the jaguar as if it were a 'dream', the crowd seems to be penetrated by the 'drills of his eyes', just as

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the ' prison darkness' is drilled through. The novelist J. M. Coetzee appears to have been deeply impressed by the way Hughes attempted to push his powers of understanding beyond their limit, so much so that his fictional character Elizabeth Costello gives a lengthy lecture about ' The Jaguar' , and what she sees as its ' primitivism'. However, the reader might also observe, that a man and a jaguar can obviously share the relationship of the prey and the predator. Here, it is difficult to imagine the jaguar as a symbol of union between man and nature. Chen Hong in his essay ' Hughes and Animals', observes about the poem – " As far as the poem is concerned, Hughes's acceptance of primitivism has indeed presented itself in the honour and respect he pays to the jaguar as the totem animal, which is basically a primitive attitude, as well as in his criticism of humans – childlike consumers of caged displays – who are much inferior to the jaguar in terms of energy and completeness of being." Other poems in the first collection, such as ' Macaw and Little Miss' and ' The Horses', also visualizes the flow of energy across time and spaces. As in ' The Jaguar', the dream in ' Macaw' is the point where the psyche of the girl arises to connect the real and the mythological in a latent, desired, sexual force. Whereas, the dream in ' The Horses' leads to the imposed piercing of the human mind by the harsh components and the horses' stoical tolerance of them. Hughes fills his poems with animal images so that his readers are personally formulating their world view when having their feet in the real natural world. When more efforts on reading his animal poems, it is clear that the majority of the poems are not simply about animals, but many references to animals are metaphorical and thought-provoking. For these poems are also connected with human experiences. Giorgio Agamben in his essay ' The Open', expertly

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changes the way about how we perceive humans, animals and language. According to him, instead of establishing a firm dividing line between man and beasts, the idea of language as a human-only skill is a myth to hide the fact that human beings are actually animals too and that animals do actually have a language. In nearly all his poems Hughes strives to spark more thoughts on the typical emphasizing and contradictions of human nature and of nature itself. To some degree, Hughes's animal poetry has marked the path of the course of his establishment of ecological between man and nature. In ' Hawk in the Rain' and ' Lupercal', animal figures are used to make implications on Hughes's kinship with animals and his fuse with Nature's vital energy. 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 remark means that Hughes's motive in writing these animal poems is to ridicule all the struggles going on in the human world. Hughes is interested in animals as creatures deserving of our attention because of their own inherent qualities or flaws. The animals represent one of the important aspects of God's creation; and each kind of animal has its own distinctive character. At the same time, Hughes, indirectly and symbolically, portrays the contrast, and sometimes the similarity, between animals and mankind. As for struggle and strife, these are as much in evidence among the animals as among human beings, and sometimes even more in evidence because in the world of animals one pike-fish eats another when hungry, and the shark in its brutality bites its own tail, snatching a bit of its own flesh. As for the style which Hughes has employed to describe the animals, it has rightly been described as " unnervingly apt" by some critics. His animal poems are a

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spectacular and fascinating range of God's creatures in a mysterious and inscrutable universe.