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Animal Imagery in Ted Hughes' *The Jaguar*

Dr. Radhika Challa
Department of English, DR. Y.S.R. ANUCET
Acharya Nagarjuna University, Andhra Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes's poetry hints at modern man's self-division and subsequent alienation from nature and consciously aims to integrate man with nature. His poetry concerns itself with modern man's problem of sense of superfluity. He is a voluminous writer and has won enormous success and high critical acclaim. Ted Hughes's "nature poetry" comprises mainly of his poems that explore man's relation with 'animal life' and 'landscapes,' constantly interacting with the elements of nature. This paper discusses the animal imagery in Hughes poem, "The Jaguar." His poems visualise archetypal energy and spontaneous vitality and how it reflects the contemporary issues of his time and the issues of our time. In the poem, "The Jaguar," Hughes is a watcher. On the surface, the poem is an animal poem which reminds us of the wrath and violence of the Jaguar. It is a symbolic poem about an animal which is fiercely energetic. Here the poet reveals his thoughts through a sight of zoo.

Key Words: Jaguar, animal, imagery, Hughes

Ted Hughes, a leading contemporary British poet appears to explore, through his creative and poetic imagination, the intensity of archaic energies, largely, in animal world. Hughes wrote poetry constantly. Critics rank him as one of the best and gifted poets of twentieth century. He is immensely prolific and considered as the natural successor to T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and Philip Larkin. His poetry has absorbed the temper and the tone of modern verse and added another dimension to the power and range of poetry. He has won innumerable awards for his writings including the New York Poetry Center First Publication Award (1974), Signal Poetry Award (1979), O.B.E. (Officer, Order of the British Empire (1977). He was made Poet Laureate in 1985 in succession to late John Benjamin. Gifford and Roberts' attempt to show that Ted Hughes *is* a great poet, in whose hands our language is both familiar and different from anything we had thought possible (11). He is called the animal poet, because many of his poems describe animals and represent human beings by using animal imagery. Animal kingdom is his private mythology. His major poetic preoccupations are: nature and myth. He is obsessed with animals, animal energies and the darks, mysterious forces that are latently embodied in the natural world.

Hughes incorporates such a great amount of animal imagery and of such force into his poetry that the reader cannot help but view himself, in every phase, reflected both on the outside and inside of those animal eyes. He has an extraordinary way of looking into life. He exposes human follies, anger, and hatred through the animal kingdom. References to animals appear as the technique for increasing the impact of poetry. His poems depict wildness, the untamed spirit, but the same poems reveal a perfectly controlled syntax. His poetry, for the most part displays extreme seriousness, vivid violence, bursts of painfully accurate analogies and apt metaphors. His themes are explored by means of image, myth and symbol.

According to Faas, Ted Hughes, "in his nature poetry, hints at modern man's self-exile from Mother Nature and of his last ditch effort to recapture some of her lost elemental force by a poetic invocation of plants and animals" (16). The voice or tone in almost all his poems is that of an omniscient narrator, and since Hughes is a poet of experience, his poetry, in this sense, is subjective and supremely and obsessively autobiographical. The following study of Hughes' animal poem exemplifies his attitude to nature and animals.

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Hughes's diction is free, expressive and varies greatly from poem to poem. Hughes can readily imagine any situation that involves an animal. Both Hughes and Eliot fashioned poems out of great imaginations elicited by complex personal feelings. In his own analysis of poetry, Hughes states that, "One of the great problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet's own life, and, by implication, renew the life of the people, if they respond to the way he has done it for himself" (83).

The Jaguar is used as a starting point for an investigation into the natural energies at work in Hughes's verse. In this poem, Hughes use techniques such as tone, metaphors and similes to show the life of the animals that you would normally see at the zoo. The imagery is achieved in any literary work through a collection of images. Walder's remarks on Ted Hughes's animal poems that,

Ted Hughes is still too often labeled an 'animal poet', although more often than not, by his detractors. But for all the sympathetic clarity with which his animals, birds or fishes are imagined, the poems have ultimately to do with human suffering, creativity and survival. 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. With some important exceptions, he expresses the vision most successfully when dealing with the non-human world, at least on the surface, allowing the human implications to trickle in secretly, of their accord. (1985 91)

In the poem, *The Jaguar*, Hughes, presents a simple contrast between the animal and the human, between the enraged freedom of the caged jaguar at the zoo and the fear and admiration of the onlookers, between the primal energy in the animal and the baser nature latent beneath human rational control. In fact, it is an encounter between civilized men, in reality, the 'fallen' natural creature, looking at his own superior self which continues to exist outside him in the jaguar.

The Jaguar, with the background of a zoo, describes the different lifestyles of animals at a zoo and he portrays the condition of the encaged animals and birds. The poem opens with the description of the apes. The animals like the apes, the parrots and even the snakes, tigers and lion seemed to be quite content with their present situation. The very first line of the poem depicts the animals in a spiritless condition, who are engaged in 'yawing' and adoring their fleas in the sun. It shows the slow, lazy movements from some of the animals to the fast, rapid movement of the jaguar. Here, Hughes uses techniques such as tone, metaphors and similes to show the life of the animals that you would normally see at the zoo.

The animals are exhausted by the boredom and surrounding. In this situation, the animals doesn't pay attention to the visitors. In the next cage, the parrots are shrieking as if they were on fire and strutting like harlots in order to attract the visitors and get nuts from them. They are "strut like cheap tarts." As the guests are looking, they become exhausted of the animals until they reach the jaguar's cage, in which they see the fierce behavior in him. The parrots are suffering from untold suffering in their cage and make sensual gestures to attract the passers by. Thus, the first stanza ends with the description of the tiger and lion which have become fatigued and deprived of their natural habitat.

In the second stanza, we have the picturesque description of the boat-constrictor. Even the boat-constrictor seems to have lost its strength and velocity and lies like an ancient fossil. Animals are deprived of their natural habitat. They are put in cage after cage: "Cage after cage seems empty, or / Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw, / If might be painted on a nursery wall" (6-9).

It suggests the condition of the other animals. They are lazy and lie motionless in the sunlight. All the animals are fatigued with indolence. The cages are not empty; they only seem to be so as there is no spontaneity among the encaged animals. As a result, the zoo looks like a multicolored picture painted on a nursery wall by the very students of the nursery.

In the third stanza, the poet introduces us with a cage in front of which the crowd are swarming, 'stands' and stares and gets hypnotized at the spectacle of a jaguar. Unlike other animals, the jaguar is restless and a mobile machinery of destructive energy. Through the prison, darkness of his eyes meets those of the viewers and they are locked in a fierce-fuse that can explode boredom its

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unknown to him. He spins from the bass to the cage, the cage then seems too small to contain him. While the other animals in the zoo look bored, the jaguar strides magnificently in the cage with an amazing energy and ferocity. His madness and boldness are evident in these lines: “By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear— /He spins from the bars, but there’s no cage to him” (15-16).

The alliterative expression, “the bang of blood in the brain” implicates the indomitable spirit of the jaguar. His fearlessness and ferocity go unparalleled and remain unchallenged. In this stanza Hughes dramatizes the intense energy of the jaguar, showing his mesmerizing effect on the beholders in the zoo: “But who runs like the rest past these arrives/ At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized, /As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enrages” (9-11). He cannot be contained in any cage. No prison can stop such ferocious energy or restrict the jaguar’s inborn spirit of independence. And the poet ends his description with the following two striking lines: “The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel. / Over the cage floor the horizons come” (19-20).

The zoo is a world where the jaguar is let loose to rein as the supreme power. The world lies under his feet and the horizon meets the cage bass, thus declaring the boundless power of the jaguar. He cannot be imprisoned inside the bars as there exists no cage that can confine him. He will go beyond the horizons, casting dazzling light of his eyes on far-off edges of the universe. Like a visionary, he cannot be confined in a tiny cage as his freedom moves from the limit of this lethargic world into a boundless space of the spiritual and astral universe.

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come. (16-20)

Through the above lines one can understand what the Jaguar is: a tremendous rebellious spirit with extraordinary energy, vitality and ferocity, and visionary powers. The jaguar is a perfect symbol of unlimited freedom and endless energy latent in humans, which he cannot express impulsively, for the sense of modernity and civilization has suppressed his primary primitiveness into the core.

The violent and predatory nature of the jaguar is balanced with his visionary power as a mystic that endows him with essential vitality and vigor. The jaguar is an embodiment of suppressed energy and demonic ferocity repressed in man. In fact, in *The Jaguar*, Hughes, employs images and metaphors to denote the tremendous violence prevalent in human nature though it remains inactive in line with the sense of modernity and civilization. As man is primarily an animal like any other except having consciousness of his condition, the poet here tries to explore the destructive and indomitable spirit in human nature by employing Jaguar as a symbol. Here in the poem Hughes celebrates the vigor and invincibility of jaguar. Though a spectator, man is not passive. He admires and shares a feeling of the brute’s wildness, ferocity and rage. According to Thurley “the cages of Hughes’s jaguars and macaws are doubly ironical: man is so much more caged and imprisoned than the animals, and it is the in virtue of his ‘single vision’ that he confines instinctive vitality behind bars (181).

Hughes is widely acclaimed for his animal poems expressive of an emblem of the ferocity of his own poetry, a vivid vitality in all forms, and obviously an indomitable violence in all forces of primitivism. The poet, with the help of such vivid expressions as the drills of his eyes, fierce-fuse, cell wilderness of freedom etc successfully depicts the characteristics of the jaguar, the symbol of energy.

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