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**Abstract:** This paper explores the way in which animal figures, a key element in the poetry of Ted Hughes, are used to tackle the author's contemporary issues. Hughes led a very troubled life, both because of personal and external factors, and therefore an imprint of such experiences is to be expected. This imprint, we reckon, is a perception of the alienated reality that surrounded Hughes. More importantly, the traumatic experiences troubling the poet's sensitivity would have constituted prime catalysts for his career to acquire the current canonical status. Taking the premise of Alienation being one of the crucial elements in literary creation throughout the 20th century as a basis, this paper offers some analyses or readings on three of Hughes' early animal poems, so as to illustrate his insights when confronted with war, the overall debasement of human nature, the disconnection from the natural world, or even the disappearance of empathy in European politics. For this paper's purposes, Hughes, as a "shaman" of sorts, would have resorted to the use of animal figures - totems- in his poems by enacting a sort of dream-like sequence, ultimately leading towards hope for mankind's self-restoration.

**Keywords:** *Ted Hughes, English poetry, Alienation, Postmodernity, Nature, Shamanism.*

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**Ander BARÓN GONZÁLEZ**

## **The Yorkshire Shaman: Te Hughes' animal Poetry overcoming social, political and economic alienation**

Ted Hughes' poetry resembles a journey through the countryside, inasmuch as we can see flashes of beasts staring back with the tranquil knowledge of possessing some unknowable and transcendent truth that escapes us mere humans. The wilderness, his childhood playground, his "turf" of snowy fields, moors, rivers, and forests, we may very well consider, offered him an escape route through which to alleviate the pressures of a troubled existence. Hughes, let us remember, lived the roughest parts of the 20th century, with both World Wars under his belt by the time he was a young man and fully conscious of how the dual war-machine of the USA and the Soviet Union were being fed for the sake of outranking one another, leaving nothing but industrial complexes and an increasingly dehumanized society in their wake. Not to mention the economical abuse communally exacted by Allied governments upon Germany after the second World War, or the problematic of the final throes of colonialism. Or the myriad small-scale conflicts on the fringes of the influence-radiuses of the Main powers (Afghan war, Korean war, Balkans conflict, so on, so forth). In the ominous sense of the expression, he lived the "interesting times", through and through, and those issues should certainly have left a lasting print in his poetical work. Considering this, the analysis of several of his animal poems -"Hawk roosting", "The Thought Fox" and "View of a Pig", for this paper's purposes- should show if and how he tackled the social, political and economical issues he lived through.

Aside from that grim socio-historical landscape, he had to cope with the void left by the death of his loved ones -most importantly, his first wife, Sylvia Plath-. Perhaps, his personal tragedy triggered in him a sort of rejection of the harsh realities of life, and act as a catalyst for the refinement of the themes of his poetry . In a way, it does look as if he never wanted to wholly abandon the realm of childhood days spent with gamekeepers, fishing and discovering the countryside, finding refuge from the memories of two deceased partners, the speculation of feminist critics about his part in Plath's suicide, and everyday news in general. Nor would anyone, truth be told. It is no wonder then, that, much like all his major precedents in 20th century English literature, he was affected by the *mal du siècle* of the 20th century: Alienation. Alienation offers a key conceptual basis upon which to build a coherent interpretation, not just of Hughes' poetry, but of the works of every major 20th century writer.

Alienation took many forms: Sexual alienation (T.S. Eliot's, *The Wasteland*, and partially Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen's emasculated existence is unforgettable), historical alienation (Pound's *Cantos*, contents aside, do try to reconnect man to a long lost essence of heroic grandeur which will allow for a regeneration), political alienation (Auden's poems of disenchantment with the Spanish Civil War), and so on. For Hughes, it was natural alienation. Yet, all these "pathologies" have one thing in common: There is always a solution, a chance for rebirth, for regaining that which was lost, and that real progress can be achieved, instead of a repetition of history. That *je ne sais quoi* lay, for Hughes, in the re-discovery of his beloved Nature; for western society had strayed from the path of ecology, turned from the natural world towards the false idols of machinery and hence came its doom. And, as, as Gifford (p.40) states, "*For Hughes the Poet, one way of achieving such insights is by taking a shamanistic approach to thinking and writing about animals*".

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The "shamanistic" interpretation of Hughes' poetry is an incredibly fitting one. It is obvious that his narratives of animal figures resemble vision quests like those of native American cultures, where the animal spirit totem acts as a conduit for enlightenment, or as symbols of human behavior. This has much to do with Hughes' perception of his surroundings, as one can easily see in, say, "The Horses": In contraposition with the advances of industrialization, which have engulfed humanity in a rampage of periodical self-destruction in ever shorter cycles, Nature prevails, frayed and torn as it may be. There is a nobility, a primeval dignity in the stillness of those horses in that frozen dawn, a moment of self-awareness and epiphany, even, that cannot be emulated by bustling streets full of anonymous faces. It is certainly difficult to think of something more awe-inspiring than "hearing the horizons endure". It is through the figures of the animals, representatives of Nature, that one may overcome the strangeness of the present and "*heal - 'heal' in its first sense meaning 'to make whole'.*" (Heaney 2013: 224).

When any given society is in peril, and, for Hughes, western society was, it is the task of the mediator between the worlds (the shaman, medicine man, witch doctor, etc.) to enter the trance and save the tribe. Within the vision, the Animal figure reveals itself. Hughes becomes the Shaman, not so that he can cure a drought or a malady, but so that he can link an estranged society and Nature in order to abandon the path of destruction and re-enter the primeval Eden -not necessarily the biblical one, but it is the closest concept-. Perhaps, he did so as a compensatory effort to straighten a harmful reality, a reality that sported wars, social conflict and a twisted economical system, all blended together in the formless haze of the western world.

The exact way in which he used animal figures to denounce the issues of his time can easily be seen by reading just a few of his earliest animal poems:

"The Thought Fox" (1957) is one of the earliest poems of Hughes', and, as such, it condenses the core social problematic. Even though it is consistently interpreted as a poem that symbolizes the creative process, an alternative, or, more accurately, complementary reading is also possible. It may very well be the case of the "Artist as a young man", in the crucial moment in which some sort of force or purpose is necessary. The apparition of the fox is the catalyst which enlightens the mind and overcomes the blockage, the disconnection. The narrative itself is quite biographical, from a first-person standpoint, and, in a way, it could be considered a manifesto of sorts. What this whole surreal, dream-like (shamanic) vision sequence entails could be, once again, how a young Hughes overcomes his personal alienation, an alienation that permeated the European intelligentsia, as previously discussed. It is safe to assume that, by extension, that same sensation of disconnection, of something that had been severed -whose cause may well have been the collective trauma of World War II-, permeated individual consciences at a global level.

At a symbolic level, the use of the fox is completely intentional. The fox has traditionally symbolized cunning, no matter which the cultural background. It is only an extension to the fox's nature that its presence triggers the poetical creation, a product of the mind, and therefore, of intellect -an attribute of the fox's-. We do not know if Hughes was familiar with Japanese culture, but it is baffling to find reminiscences of the immemorial Shinto religion, a belief system that is extremely connected to Nature, as was Hughes, in the figure of the *Kitsune* kami, or "spirit/god". According to Shinto beliefs, *Kitsune* are minor, cunning fox-like spirits or deities, usually good and associated with crops. Not only that, but in folklore, "*the fox [...] is intimately associated with bewitchment and possession of human souls*" (Picken 2011:160). Even the language is evocative of possession, for the fox "enters the dark hole of the head" It is through this presence's possession that Hughes embarks on the vision quest and re-connects with Nature, thus acquiring purpose and somewhere to belong -even if it be something rather ethereal, like Art-.

Regarding politics, in "Hawk Roosting" (1960) we can see a very clear discourse on the violent nature of man and why war even happens, which probably reflects his

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experiences living through the second World War and the tales of Hughes' father's campaigns. After all, "*William Hughes [...] was one of only 17 men [...] to return alive from the Battle of Gallipoli*" (Webb 2013:34). The aerial superiority of the hawk, its "design", so as to speak, allows for it to become the outmost hunter of the skies. It now holds Creation in its foot, instead of being subject to the primeval forces that created it. Superiority, albeit merely evolutionary, is both the cause and justification for wanton carnage and to "Kill where I please because it is all mine".

This predicament is probably an interpretation of the world Hughes lived in. Considering that Hughes lived through WWII and the Cold War, a period when dictatorial figures made the news daily, it is no wonder why he so crudely describes an abuse of power based on superiority. This superiority, of the Hawk faced with avian creatures, and of Mankind when faced with Mankind, is nothing but an instinct. Which raises the question of whether superiority is real, when it is directed to wanton predation. Or, in the human equivalent, if our top-of-the-world position, the so called "civilization" mankind has created, and our intelligence, that which distinguishes from animals, are really something to be proud of, when they fail to ward off the beast within. Maybe, just maybe, violence is something instinctive, something that all humans, as a part of their animal condition, have embedded in their subconscious.

Carnage is achievable by those with the means. When not feathers and talons, it is rifles and bullets, or "civil" institutions such as governments or penitentiaries; anyhow, the outcome remains the same: Some die, some live. And thus, the food-chain and the human-chain become fused and subsumed, casualties all. The main difference here is that, according to Picot's (187) vision, "*the natural world, [...] is offered a timeless alternative: timeless because, unlike the man-made world with its inbuilt tendency to self-destruct, the natural world is always renewing itself*". Predators kill as a part of a natural cycle, in order for life to carry on; one finds renewal in destruction. On the other hand, predation amongst humans (economical abuse, war, etc) are the produce of hubris, ultimately devoid of any other outcome other than suffering and death. Considering all that, it is fairly easy to assume that, as Sagar (17) states, "*guilt lies rather in a state of being, a set of unconscious attitudes we all inherit, complacent and hubristic and inimical to Nature's laws*". Hughes, we may hypothesize, understood this collective guilt, realized that deciding over life and death was not a human prerogative, but a domain of Nature, and shared it with the world -or unearthed it for direct confrontation- so that mankind could reflect on it.

Economy being a product of mankind, the overt animal references to the topic in Hughes poetry are rather scarce. However, there is a rather interesting economy-related reading of "A View of a Pig" (1960) basing ourselves in the concept of alienation.

"A View of a Pig" is a poem of dehumanization, of materialism, of abuse, of no longer caring where mankind draws nourishment from. Bentley (p.18) points out that "*the dead pig here embodies what is intractable [...] and thus disturbing for a consciousness that constitutes itself through its ability to represent the world to itself*". The failure of the narrator to feel any form of empathy towards the dead pig -ergo, being alienated from Nature- which will become "pork" may, for Hughes, be a simile of the lack of empathy felt when the cold and faceless machine of capitalism exploited/exploits natural and human resources alike. "Disregard" may be the most accurate term to define this. A disregard projected upon those "lesser", a sort of self-righteous attitude that justifies, say, colonization, the creation of vassal-states or the occupation of other states (as both the Allies and the Soviet Union did in post-war Germany), etc., and which still endures in the form of the constant looking down upon the so called "third-world" and the overall lack of caring about crucial issues such as wildlife extinction, deforestation, labor abuse in impoverished countries, etc. All of which are the features of global economy as we know it. What Hughes is probably seeking is the confrontation of realities, shattering western ideals

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by facing actions and consequences, and, once again, using an animal as the conduit for reconnection.

It is perfectly clear, therefore, that animals are indeed used by Hughes as a vehicle for approaching social, political and economic issues. It is through the use of animals that the -to some extent, self-imposed- quest of indicating how to regain the primeval human essence is achieved. Be it through confrontation with a symbolic discourse on the baser nature and instincts of mankind, or through the reconciliation with the primeval essence via "shamanic" descents into an inner pond of self-awareness, the Natural world offers, for Hughes, a chance for humanity to make amends and redeem itself, and regain the place Nature holds for it.

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