



RESEARCH PAPER

**Diverse Animals' Imagery, Symbolism and Vitality in the Poetry of
Ted Hughes**

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: July 09, 2021 Accepted: October 07, 2021 Online: October 09, 2021	The paper discusses the animal's vitality in the poems of Ted Hughes from the perceptive of deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Additionally, the notion of animals' vitality is expanded into mythological or religious dimensions, when animals intercede in human existence and assume an equal status to god. The paper also investigates how Hughes goes beyond animals' identities and gives them extraordinary powers. Hughes' representation (in this paper) of the animals such as "Pike," "Swans," which appear in <i>A Primer of Birds</i> (1981), "Little Whale Song," which is included in the volume <i>Wolf Watching</i> (1989) attempts to evoke the power and egotism of animals. All metaphors and symbols linked to animals are the physical characteristics of animals and are based on the shamanist idea. His poems undermine the traditional binary antagonism between man and animal and show why animals are more powerful and spiritual than humans because they live according to their instincts.
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Introduction

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was born in the West Yorkshire hamlet of Mytholmroyd. He was closely attached to the natural world throughout his life. As the people of Mytholmroyd used to earn their bread and butter primarily by wool weaving, his life was affected by the Industrial Revolution (Feinstein, 2003, p. 5). Hughes enjoys hunting near the Pennine hillsides with his elder brother early in his life (Feinstein, 2003, p. 10). In 1937, Hughes moved to a mining town, Mexborough, but he soon found a farm and estate with lakes and woods in the nearby country. This provided him with the chance to experience nature (*Poetry in the Making* 16). His book *Lupercal* (1960) contains such famous animal poems as "The Thought-Fox," and "Hawk Roosting." Also well-known are the poems of *Crow* (1971), in which the bird, envisaged as a mythological trickster figure, speaks, or rather, sings. A Nobel Prize Winner for

Literature in 1995, Seamus Heaney states that in Hughes' poems, "racial memory, animal instinct and poetic imagination all flow into one another with an exact sensuousness" (Shahadat, 2012. P. 1). According to Nye, Hughes "began writing poems in adolescence, yet had a love for wild animals and always wanted to possess one" (quote in Shahadat, 2012, p. 2). Hughes wrote twenty-eight whimsical, lyrical, and robust animal poems such as the mole, cat, squirrel, and donkey. This shows his keen attachment to the animal world and animal life.

Ted Hughes' "Pike" as a Divine Predator

In the opening lines of the poem "Pike," Hughes sees the pike as a baby due to its size and presents it as an innocent creature of nature. Moreover, he uses the word "tigering" which refers to the tiger and is often considered one of the most powerful creatures for hunting on land. Under this binary interpretation of the baby and the beast, the poet suggests that the pike also has similar features under and on the pond. The pikes with the help of their specialized body structure seem to be seamlessly dancing among the flies rather than hunting them. Ted Hughes (2005) comments on the fish structure in the following lines,

Killer from the egg: the malevolent aged grin,
They dance on the surface among the flies (p. 84).

The juxtaposition of -Hughes uses- words "delicacy and horror" in poem also expresses the incongruity within the pike (TH, CP, p. 84). In Judith Wright's *Hunting Snake*, it is implied that the snake and pike are "creatures of mystery" that we tend to think of as different from creatures of loveliness (May 20, 2013). The pike was delicate at birth but horrible when hunting. The pike is favorable in both contexts, as you want to be horrifying when you are hunting, yet beautiful when young. In this rare case, it appears that the poet portrays the pike as privileged.

The jaws are also perfectly structured for hunting. The pike appears perfect by birth. It is perhaps here that Hughes reveals the problem of being a pike- perhaps the pike as perfectly built for killing- and thus has to live up to this expectation by honing its hunting skills all its life. Here the poet implies that the pike may be an autobiographical device; Hughes may be remembering his past in his descriptions of the pond as well as the pike. This is similar to a poem found in the same anthology "The Cockroach" in which Hughes finds that the animal that he is describing is reflective of his own life, as well as all the living things on this earth (TH, CP, p. 5).

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs,
Not to be changed at this date;
A life subdued to its instrument. (TH, CP, p. 84-5)

The last image, as Sagar (1975) observed, is substantiated by two anecdotes connected in the following stanzas, which both emphasize the cannibalism of the pike

(p. 41). "Two, six pounds each, over two feet long, / High and dry and dead in the willow-herb" (TH, CP, p. 85). One of them died because it swam into the mouth of the other, and the second, in turn, died from suffocation. This description again displays the pike's hunting nature: the pike wants to stay on top, even though it is at the mercy of the poet, who "feeds fry to them" and keeps them "behind glass (TH, CP, p. 85). As the Chinese saying goes, "Before setting out for revenge, you first dig two graves: one for your enemy and the other for yourself" (Confucius). Ted Hughes (1994) -in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose-* demonstrates the predatory instincts of animals, and some critics thus call Hughes' poetry a "poetry of violence" (p. 251). Furthermore Hughes says, his critics have been particularly horrified when his poems emphasize the predacious actions of "the darlings of our pastoral idyll," (p. 257) like, for example, the thrush. Hughes also argues that the pike's killing practice is per sacramental law and shows why this is the case (p. 262). Furthermore, this argument frames the pike as a sacred animal, one perhaps handcrafted by God to do amazing things.

In his essay "*Poetry and Violence*," Hughes explains what he desires to deliver through the image of pike. I started them "*Pike*" and "*Hawk Roosting*" as a chain in which "*pike and hawk*" could be archangels, sagging in beaming beauty round the creator's sovereignty, self-possessed of huge, divine power [. . .] but either relatively motionless, or stirring only very gradually -at harmony, and truly collected of the shining material of the law. Like lads of God [. . .], I desired to emphasize on my natural world -these acquainted of my boyhood- in a 'divine' facet. I wished to elaborate my sagacity of that. Yet again, these living beings are 'at rest in the law' -respectful, law-abiding, and as I say the law in creaturely form. If Pike and Hawk kill and their killing practice is according to law, so this killing is a "sacrament" in this logic (Hughes, 1994, p. 262).

Seemingly, nature "red in tooth and claw" fills Hughes with religious awe. To Hughes, the animal's automatic obedience to its (predatory) instincts is "divine law". His employment of phrases such as "divine law," "sacrament," and "sons of God" suggests he is speaking within the Christian tradition, but his idea of "divine law" and his admiration of its embodiment in the pike and hawk are by no means consistent with Christian doctrine. His description in "*Pike*" is strikingly similar to Lawrence's identification of fish that Rohman (2009) refers to Lawrence's "spiritualization" of fish (p. 99). Hughes' comparison of animals to "sons of God" would be considered to be blasphemous in Christian orthodoxy. Hughes, therefore, uses such phrases, not in an orthodox sense, but rather to express the sense of religious wonder that the predatory nature of animals evokes in him.

Hughes' poem does not explicitly portray pike as divine, but in one of his essays Hughes stated that his intention in writing pike was to focus pike in a "divine dimension" (Hughes, 1994, p. 262) Moreover, in the same essay he refers to pike as "sons of God". Ted Hughes has utilized the natural environment to create habitations in which humans are only one among thousands of inhabitants and are often not as strong as they think. Hughes's poetry depicts the deep-rooted savagery in the natural

world and the predatory behavior that is inherent in all living things, yet he does not consider it improper.

The images of the pike in the first part of the poem are much diverse in comparison to those in the final part. Earlier, as we have observed, pikes were presented as creatures that could be defined—this implies the detachment and distinction between the poet and the pike. In the later part of the poem, however, the distinction between poet and pike is blurred. In the final part of the poem, the speaker's pike harpooning practices are interconnected. The speaker does not dare to cast his angling rod in the water, "Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old." When the poet acts upon "cast and fish," the speaker's hair is "frozen" on his head "for what might move, for what eye might move" (TH, CP, p. 85). The homonym "eye" in this line muddles the dissimilarity between the "I" and the pike. The final stanza of the poem deals with an imperceptible and obscure "dream," "freed" by a "darkness beneath night's darkness." The line, "darkness beneath night's darkness" points out the profundity of the gloom that has given rise to his "dream"; however, it also gives an impression of the dimness of the pool. The "dream" surges up towards the poet who is "watching" (TH, CP, p. 85). The "dreamy" pike is also the object of "watching" in the third stanza of the poem. The poem's final line again blurs the difference between the speaker and the pike. The frequent muddling of the distinction between pike and human might well indicate that the "dream" refers not only to the pike, but also to the poet's unconscious response to the resemblance between a human being and a pike, or the poet's understanding of his own "pike-ness."

Roberts and Gifford (1981) have aligned Hughes' representation of the pike with his interest in shamanism. According to them, Hughes' pike, like "the thought-fox" and many of his other animals' creatures, is comparable to the shaman's "helping spirits," who often assume animal shape, eliciting feelings of fear, and serve as mediators between the shaman and the mysterious pre-conscious animal world (p. 44). Such an interpretation clarifies the double referent of the "dream" as both pike and something within the speaker's consciousness, something that rises to the surface of the lake, as well as to the surface of the consciousness. The animal, or pike, in this case, functions as a catalyst for the shaman/human consciousness to come into contact with the instinctive powers or energies normally suppressed. The speaker's fear when fishing for pike is caused not so much by the knowledge of the pike's instinctive and predatory energies, as its ability to evoke these energies within his consciousness.

Ted Hughes' poem shows that instinctive energies ultimately overcome human rationality, as the speaker is overcome by the pike. Hughes' pike represents instinctive consciousness, which is implicitly in contrast with the mental/rational consciousness that predominates in the consciousness of human beings. Hughes focuses on the predatory behavior inherent in instinctive consciousness. Hughes' speaker is overcome by the discovery of his own "pike-ness" and his own instinctive consciousness.

Ted Hughes' "Swans" as an Enchanted Poet

In the very beginning of the poem "Swans," swans are "washed in Arctic" and then "return[ed] to their ballroom of glass" but are "still in the grip of the wizard" (TH, CP, p. 600). Seemingly, swans have been under the influence of the spell of "the wizard" during their stay in Arctic areas. Hughes possibly speaks of the migration of swans from subarctic Asia to regions that are more temperate during the winter. Such a metaphor links swans with humans who tend to move from land to land according to the situation of circumstances. This is the first in a series of references that connect swans with humanity or humans in Hughes' poem. The representation of swans as enthralled creatures occurs repeatedly in folklore and myth (Sax, 2001, p. 250-52). Most important in Hughes' "Swans," they are maiden swans, who are significant figures in Eurasian folklore; they turn themselves into women for short periods and marry humans, usually princes before they return to their original forms and fly away from their spouses (Sax, 2001, p. 250). The figure of the swan maiden seems the more appropriate as Hughes consistently refers to swans using feminine pronouns. However, the imagery of Hughes' swans associates them with humans. The association created between swans and humans is not representative but associative.

The mention of a wizard as the enchanter of swans recalls Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, which is also inspired by the folklore of the swan maiden. This ballet features swan maidens who are swans by day and humans by night due to magic the figure of the swan maiden seems the more spell cast by an evil necromancer or wizard (Wiley, 1985, p. 33, 35).

The spellbound swan "meditate[s] all day on her mirror / hypnotised with awe" and is held "glued in [her] reflection" (Sax, 2001, p. 600). The swan's preoccupation with its appearance, reflected in a stream, recalls the legend of Narcissus, a handsome boy who falls in love with his own image after seeing it in a stream; because he was not able to turn himself away from it and died. Similar to Narcissus, a swan is a beautiful creature. Additionally, the bodily structure of swans is such that they naturally look down toward the surface of the water, and, like Narcissus, are held prisoner by their reflections. This myth also recalls the human psychological disorder, narcissism, and thus it bestows a human psychological life upon the swan. However, swans' fascination with their reflections also appears to be an allusion to their shape-shifting capabilities; their reflection might be the evidence of their transformations that keep them enchanted.

Swans are "possessed / by the coil / of a black and scowling serpent" (TH, CP, p. 600). In the literal sense, if they are "possessed" by the snake's coil, they are expected to be doomed; certain snakes use this coil to kill their prey, a swan could not escape from such a grasp. However, they might also be "possessed" in the figurative sense of the word, as in *Genesis*, in which the serpent was the one that convinced Eve to take the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, thereby precipitating mankind's fall. In both cases, the snake seems to symbolize a wicked sorcerer whose influence holds the swans figuratively and literally fast in its "grip" (TH, CP, p. 600).

In the last line of the poem, the poet shifts his mind from human and compares the swans with "snowflake[s]" and links with Apollo. Additionally, the swans' fascinator, "the wizard," rhymes with the *blizzard*. Given the sub-zero temperatures of the Arctic, the blizzard personified by "the wizard" has caused the enchantment of the swans. Their Arctic enchantment has influenced "the jewel" which remains "stuck in their throats" (TH, CP, p. 600). As Hughes calls the swans "snowdrop lyrical daughter[s]" (TH, CP, p. 600), "the jewel" suggests a talent for musical and poetic manifestations. Thus the freezing Arctic regions, which are sterile and barren, prevent swans from fulfilling their potential as poets. The swans' capabilities, like the poet's own capabilities, are developed by "searching the dregs of old lakes / for her lost music" (TH, CP, p. 601). According to Oxford English Dictionary, the words "lyrical" and "lyric" are derived from the Greek word for the lyre, the harp-like musical instrument used by the bard and frequently represented as one of the assets of Apollo. Apollo was the ancient Greek god of the sun and poetry; importantly, swans were considered to be sacred to Apollo (Sax, 2001, p. 250).

Additionally, in (1948) Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*- a work that Hughes admitted was of unlimited significance to him- the white swan is supposed to represent the goddess of poetry (p. 346). Hughes' vision of the gift for poetry as a jewel blocking the throat, literally obstructing the manifestation of poetry, suggests that the *Cygnus olor* or mute swan (a species of the swan) serves as a model for his own swan image. Unlike other sorts of swans, mute swans have straight windpipes and thus lack a resonating chamber. Their voices are thus restricted to "grunts, snorts and hisses" (Hutchins, 2002, p. 365). The portrayal of swans as poets who are struggling to find their "lost music" also recalls the legend of the swan melody, which tells us that swans produce a magical lovely song as they pass away (Sax, 201, p. 250).

"Searching the dregs of old lakes

for her lost music.

Then they all write up the air,

A hard Hoover onset of cavalry-

Harp the iceberg wall with soft fingers.

Or drift, at evening, far out (TH, CP, p. 601).

When swans fly up into the air, they transform, if only for an instant, into bards who play (possibly Apollonian) harps: "[They] / harp the iceberg wall with soft fingers" (TH, CP, p. 601). Swans are described as enchanted poets as if their lyrical abilities occur instantaneously when they transform. Swans possibly also "drift, at evening, far out," approaching "the sun / and the snowflake of their enchantment melts" (TH, CP, p. 601). Certainly, in *Swan Lake*, twilight proclaims the lifting of the wizard's spell and the change of the swan-maidens (Wiley, 1985, p. 35). Furthermore, the swans' progress toward the sun will dissolve the Arctic charm that blocks their

poetic power, as the god of the sun is also the god of poetry. By drawing on the connotations of swans in myths and linking them with the poetry folklore of the swan song, Hughes' characterizes his swans as struggling poets.

The imagery of Hughes' swans is influenced by the imagery of swans in legends and myths. The restricted vocal capabilities of the speechless swan species are also likely to have influenced such a description of swans. Intrinsically, the imagery of Hughes' swans speaks as much about poetry as it does about swans. The poet's swans are not symbols in general but are themselves, poets.

Hughes' swan image relies on the material reality of swans. Hughes poets' swan images exploit the mythical and folklore-based supernatural qualities associated with swans. Hughes' swans are essentially different from humans. Hughes' swan blurs the lines between the swan and human identity. Moreover, his portrayal of the enchanted poet and shape-shifting beings shows that he understands swans in terms of supernatural characteristics.

Ted Hughes' "Little Whale Song" as a Song for Harmonious Living with Nature

The poem *Little Whale Song* starts with an investigation into the self-awareness of the whale. The poet asks, "What do they think of themselves" (TH, CP, p. 775). Brandes (1991) claims that the two central stanzas of the poem give the whales' supposed to answer to this question (p. 261). The poem's title is probably an allusion to the reply whales give to the poet's question, but more generally, it also refers to the sounds that whales use to communicate with each other. Sound generation, including an impulse of sound, and the detection of echoes are both aspects of echolocation. The return echoes are modified copies of the outgoing pulse; the brain may create pictures of the environment by comparing the outgoing pulse with the returning echoes (Jones, 2005, p. 484). The whale's capacity to sense its surroundings is central to Hughes' whale imagery.

Whales' discourse is such that they see their association with the world like colors in a palette: "We stir / Our self-colour in the pot of colours / Which is the world" (TH, CP, p. 776). Such descriptions portray the world as an organization of co-dependent and interrelated parts: whales' may influence the compilation of colors in the world by mingling such that their colors (self-colors) mix with other whales' colors. In his assessment of the environmental revolution (1970) by Max Nicholson, Hughes stated that he has this worldview, in which he explains the world from the point of view of nature and demonstrates how the whole world lives.

Finally, the immense complexity and accuracy of its linked functioning components, such as the winds, rocks, animals, water from waterfalls, and weather, reveal in the process how unimportant everything really is. The ultimate sense of its brevity and fragility is frightening, the tiny area of working land, the living cell's fragility (Winter Pollen 133-34).

According to the poem *Little Whale Song*, whales have an outstanding vision and consciousness of this multifaceted system that makes up the world. Echolocation enables them to observe the world from *Nature's point of view*.

Their body-tons, echo-chambered,
Amplify the whisper
Of current and airs, of sea-peoples
And planetary manoeuvres,
Of seasons, of shores, and of their own
Moon-lifted incantation (TH CP 775, 776)

Through echolocation, whales effectively replicate their surroundings, becoming themselves a clone of the world. Hughes' scientific imagery ("Their X-ray all dimension / Grasp of this world's structures," and "their brains budded / Clone replicas of the electron world" (TH CP 775) attributes scientific accuracy to whales' insight. Their brains are global, as they can imagine the earth's wholeness. They can grasp and re-imagine the whole world's structure. According to Hughes, his view of the Earth as God's material for our profit and use is in stark contrast to the "Western Civilization" viewpoint, which is based on the concepts of "Reformed Christianity" and "Old Testament Puritanism," both of which look upon the Earth as a raw material heap to be worked. These crawling and creeping creatures are demons of dirt, and they were also made and placed on the earth for mankind's sole use and benefit (Winter Pollen 129).

Hughes clearly condemns such an anthropocentric and materialistic view. He admires whales for their ability to see the earth from their own perspective. Hughes' view of whales as "colours" in a palette (which represents the world) could be interpreted as an equation of whales with artists.

We are beautiful. We stir
Our self-colour in the pot of colours
Which is the world. At each
Tail-stroke we deepen
Our being into the world's lit substance,
And our joy into the world's
Spinning bliss, and our peace

Into the world's floating, plumed peace. (TH CP 776)

The collaboration between the whale and the world is like the creative activity of an artist with colors; it is an inventive and beautiful combination between the self-the whale/artist-and others-the world/colors. Through this combination, the whale and the world complement and intensify each other's existence. Such a harmonious and complete connection is different from what Hughes understands as the western world's materialistic and anthropocentric attitude. Whales are superior beings because of their extensive grip on the world. They act out their superior roles in the "Earth-drama".

Through the original Earth-drama

In which they perform, as from the beginning.

The Royal House.

The Loftiest, spermier

Passions, the most exquisite pleasures,

The noblest characters, the most god-like

Oceanic presence and poise -

The most terrible fall. (TH CP 776)

However, even though Hughes pictures whales as excellent, elevated, lovely, and sensual, they are also tragic. The word *sperm*, which Hughes treats as transforming whales' "passions," certainly refers to semen. Moreover, it refers to "spermaceti," a substance in the head of the sperm whale enclosed by an organ now believed to be involved in sperm whale sound production. The reference to spermaceti indicates that the sperm whale species served as a model for Hughes' whale imagery. As an allusion to "semen," Hughes' use of "spermier" indicates that the whales' passions are superlatively sexual and procreative.

The final line of the poem shows that the whale's destiny is the loss of its royal position. However, what sort of *fall* does the poet refer to? According to Brandes and Scigaj, "the most terrible fall" probably refers to the whale species' possible extinction (Brandes 152; Scigaj 153). Hughes' review of Nicholson's book shows that his main concerns are the state of the atmosphere and the preservation of species. Although commercial whale hunting has not entirely exterminated any whale species, whale hunting has reduced some species of whales to low levels, such that their function in the ecology has diminished significantly (Hutchins, 2003, p. 5). The need for conservation of whale species is described as emerged during the late twentieth century as one of world's most highly publicized environmental issues. International

focus on the decimation of the stocks of great whales portrayed the human capacity for greed and wanton destruction of natural resources like few other issues could have. (Hutchins, 2003, p. 9)

The introduction of such policies, as well as the publicity given to the endangerment of the species, has undoubtedly contributed to Hughes' representation of whales as the royalty of the natural world, crucial to the planet's ecosystem, but threatened however by a terrible downfall, as kings and queens are indeed prone to.

Whales are superior creatures for both Lawrence and Hughes. Hughes associates their superiority with royalty, while Lawrence links their superiority to nothing less than divinity. Both poets' portrayals of the whale function as examples of different ways of living with self and the world, and of changes in the ways that function in western culture. Thus, both poets' whales serve as models for humans.

As to Hughes, whales are superior creatures and represent an intuitive and sensual attitude towards self and world. The use of sonar by dolphins, and from then on sounds that probably function in echolocation has been recorded for nearly all species of toothed whales (Jones, 2005, p. 486).

Conclusion

Ted Hughes' poems show that instinctive energies ultimately overcome human rationality and focuses on the predatory behavior inherent in instinctive consciousness. The poet believes firmly in animal's vitality, supremacy, and dominancy over human beings. By giving the priority to the animal, he intentionally subverts the traditional hierarchy between man and animal. Scrutinizing into the milieu in which he worked gives us a clue upon where his animalism comes from. In the surges of materialism -in the horrors of two World Wars in the case of- Hughes must have witnessed the total annihilation of humanity. And, as a writer and lover of human beings, he wants to find something which can replace the traditional God. He does not go far to trace the light; he looks inward and nearby. He believes that man can be happier to acknowledge himself as a happy animal in Nature and his suggestion is still valid in this mechanistic world.

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