

## **Animal Imagery in the Poetry of D.H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes: A Comparative Study**

**Shefali Banerji**

Research Aspirant  
Kolkata, India

### **Abstract**

Both D.H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes shared a deep preoccupation with the animal world in their poetry. Animals appear in their poems not only as poetic subjects, but also as major symbols, metaphorically conveying a great deal more than what is palpable at first glance. My paper thus intends to examine the treatment of animal imagery in some of the major poetic works of D.H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes through a comparative analysis. In this context, I intend to undertake a close investigation of Lawrence's *Birds, Beast and Flowers* and Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*. It is interesting to note that both these poets hailed from similar working class backgrounds and shared a deep intimacy with the natural world, which largely shaped their ideas. This similarity in stimulus perhaps leads to a correspondence in ideology – of man's ignorance and animal wisdom. However, there is a definite divergence in their treatment of the subjects and choice of animals which comes to light when Hughes's aggressive animals are contrasted with Lawrence's timid ones.

**Keywords:** comparative study, animal imagery, nature poems, modern poetry, 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry, Hughes, Lawrence

### **Introduction**

D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes, the champions of animal poetry, were both firm believers of the mystical powers of Nature and the animal persona. But before discussing the prevalence of animal imagery in their poems, it is important to understand what exactly an image is. In this regard, we may take the help of Caroline Spurgeon's definition of an "image", which is quite fitting. She attempts to "use the term 'image'... as the only available word to cover every kind of simile, as well as every kind of what is really compressed simile – metaphor" (5).

C. Day Lewis's simple and concise definition of an image as "picture made out of words" (18) is powerful in its brevity, though it does not suggest the impact and full potential of an image.

So we can, therefore, assume that imagery is what appeals to our visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and other senses, and is a powerful representation of these combined faculties which creates a vivid picture in the mind.

The animal imagery in the poetry of both Lawrence and Hughes is a powerful and intense portrayal of the remarkable influence of the animal world and its supernatural persona, which is rife in Hughes's *Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*, as well as Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*.

### Lawrence's bruised animal persona

In the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923), Lawrence found a new theme abandoning his earlier inclination towards autobiography. The First World War had left him psychologically and emotionally bruised. The devastation it brought in its wake made him question the meaning and existence of creation, of life itself (Saldanha 77).

Lawrence returns to the world of nature and finds in it that inherently intuitive life which industrialism was trying to eliminate. The birds, beasts and flowers manifest in them the same energy, the same urge, the same quickening as man (Saldanha 78).

The Evangelistic Beasts and the Animal poems in the collection are utterances from a fixed and determined self of Lawrence (Poovalingam 226). There are four poems under the general heading "The Evangelistic Beasts" and each of them has a gospel saint's name for the individual titles.

The section Animals contains a total of eight poems – "The Ass", "He-Goat", "She-Goat", "Elephant", "Kangaroo", "Bibbles", "Mountain Lion" and "The Red Wolf".

"The Ass" presents the creature in its humble and unassertive circumstances. Like man, the ass is also ruled by knowledge. It has, sadly, tumbled into the "rut of love".

The ass,

Somehow, alas, he fell in love,  
And was sold into slavery.

He fell into the rut of love,  
Poor ass, like man, always in rut,  
The pair of them alike in that.

All his soul in his gallant member  
And his head gone heavy with the knowledge of desire  
And humiliation.

The ass, that was once physically potent and virile, is now reduced to an inactive and slogging being. The ass has now become a mental construct and has surrendered its physical being. Like the modern man, the ass is conscious of its own desire and hence feels "humiliation".

In the poem “Elephant”, the elephant is posited as one of the oldest animals in the world – “the hugest, oldest of beasts”. “Elephant” discloses the ironic situation of a majestic being subjugated by a “pale fragment of a Prince”.

Pale, dispirited Prince, with his chin on his hands, his nerves tired out,  
 Watching and hardly seeing the trunk-curl approach and clumsy, knee-lifting  
 salaam  
 Of the hugest, oldest of beasts, in the night and the fire-flare below.

The poem reveals how man is superannuated by animals.

“Kangaroo”, on the other hand, is indorsed as one of the best of Lawrence’s poems by James Reeves. He writes,

It is a remarkable feature of Lawrence’s expressionism that, even when – as in “Kangaroo” – he intellectualizes the experience, the occasion of the poem is always physically present, with an acute, sometimes uncomfortable actuality. “Kangaroo” is, indeed, one of the most completely successful of Lawrence’s animal-poems. It expresses a wonderful sensitivity to the physical actuality of the animal. The ‘philosophy’ may or may not be nonsense, but if the kangaroo has a ‘meaning’, surely Lawrence came nearer to realizing it than any other writer could have done. (177)

Lawrence's "Mountain Lion" is a melancholic poem. It mourns the unfortunate demise of a lioness, shot dead by two men, and the loss incurred by Nature.

The speaker encounters the two men carrying a dead lioness only after having established the scene to intrigue and poke the mind of the reader.

Men!  
 Two Men!  
 Men! The only animal in the world to fear!

They hesitate.  
 We hesitate.  
 They have a gun.  
 We have no gun.

The speaker of “Mountain Lion” expresses a strong distrust of humans when he says that man is the “only animal in the world to fear”.

The use of animals in Lawrence exemplifies for us where we are going wrong as humans, and also serves as a cautionary tale of Man’s insatiable hunger and its ghastly consequences.

### **Hughes’s worship of the animalistic fervour**

Similarly famous for his animal poetry, Ted Hughes chose his animals to exemplify the

virility of life. In his poetry, animals are not playthings to be meddled with, but lords of life and death – they don the robes of mystical gods. They are found free from reticence, fears, and are full of nerve and awareness. Ted Hughes in his *Poetry in the Making* (1967) asserts about poetry –

In a way, I suppose, I think of poems as a sort of animal. They 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 a certain wisdom. They know something special... something perhaps which we are very curious to learn. (15)

Hughes's first volume of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), illustrated all these ideas and established his name as a poet. The volume includes animal poems like "The Hawk in the Rain", "The Jaguar", "The Thought-Fox", "The Horses", "Law in the Country of Cats" and so on.

As John Greening tells us,

*The Hawk in the Rain* is a remarkable debut collection, even half a century on. In fact, seen now as part of a broader literary landscape, it stands out still more: a Pennine crag beside the gentle poetic meadows and literary downlands possessed by something potent, demonic, dangerous, somehow beyond time, certainly beyond the 1950s. (2)

Ted Hughes's second volume of verse *Lupercal* (1960) tends to depict that the essence of existence – both of life and the supreme universe is solely founded upon violence. In the world of nature, birds, beasts, fishes, insects, and human life, there is a recurrent war, a battle both internal and external. Consequently, power dominates and the powerful exists, while the adversaries are destroyed. The collection includes "Crow Hill", "A Dream of Horses", "Esther's Tomcat", "Hawk Roosting", "Cat and Mouse", "An Otter", "Pike" and more.

The poem "The Thought-Fox" is about the journey of writing a poem. The poet is overwhelmed by the frustrations of what we can call "the poet's block", the inability to write a poem. Precisely then arrives a silhouette of an animal upon the scene, possibly a fox, which is in fact a dynamism personifying a complex kind of knowledge that is beyond the grasp of ordinary men:

Through the window I see no star;  
 Something more near  
 Though deeper within darkness  
 Is entering the loneliness...

The poem 'The Jaguar' is one of his most famous poems. The poem is an anecdote for the zoo-life but it also transcends beyond it. A symbol of vivacity, of electricity, of an enigma. It compares the animals of the zoo, distinguishing the jaguar from the rest – then fixates upon the primal persona of the jaguar.

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:  
His stride is wildernesses of freedom...

Hughes's "The Horses" is a different kind of poem altogether. Here we see animals that look grand in their very placidness and compliance. No wild force is prevalent in the poem. There is equanimity all around the poet when he sees ten horses looking enormous but absolutely still and motionless: "Megalith-still". The poet then contrasts the stillness and the calm of these horses with the hullabaloo of the swarming streets, though the comparison comes only towards the end, and is made in not so many words.

Hughes's "Hawk Roosting" paints the figure of the hawk not merely as a destroyer, but also, in a twist of events, as a creator.

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.

The assertiveness of the "I" in the poem is quite fairly authoritarian. It commands order, it commands respect, it controls how things should be, and it dictates how things will be.

I am going to keep things like this.

In the poem "Pike", Hughes explains and introduces the apparent dimensions of the pike. In order to come in closer contact with the pike and appreciate the definitive facet of the violence it symbolizes, Hughes strengthens our involvement through the act of fishing (Shekhawat).

Speaking in general terms, it can be said that Hughes's animal poetry is based on the Shamanist idea that animals are more potent and sacred when compared to men, since they live a totally instinctive life. Animals are far from limits and social values, thus they are capable of living and optimising their true self.

### **Was Hughes indebted to Lawrence?**

Pointing out Hughes's debt to D. H. Lawrence, Keith Sagar tells us that,

Like Lawrence, Hughes found that he had a gift for receiving such communications from nature, and that they were the most precious things in life. (71)

He further informs us that,

Lawrence and Hughes came from very similar backgrounds: working-class families in heavily industrialized communities but within walking distance of unspoiled countryside to which they would escape as often as possible. (72)

Finally,

Many of Lawrence's fundamental tenets became also Hughes's – his opposition to rationalism, humanism, and certain aspects of science; his insistence on the sacredness of Nature; his belief that at some time in ancient history there had been a fall, into self-consciousness and hubristic materialism, into knowledge, that is, of the self-apart-from-God... (73)

### The comparative study

Now, on a comparison of the poetry of D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes, we realise that animals serve as symbols and exemplars for a greater truth, pertaining to their strong belief in animal intelligence and wisdom of the natural world, and their contempt of man's ignorance.

In "The Ass", Lawrence asserts:

The ass was the first of all animals to fall finally into love,  
 From obstacle-leaping pride,  
 Mare obstacle,  
 Into love, mare-goal and the knowledge of love.

Similarly, in "An Otter", Hughes writes that the creature:

Brings the legend of himself  
 From before wars or burials, in spite of hounds and vermin poles...

We grasp that attention is also paid to the physical reality of the animals. Their physical structures, bodies and habits form an integral part of the poetry of both Lawrence and Hughes.

We can see this in Hughes's "The Thought-Fox":

Cold, delicately as the dark snow  
 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
 Two eyes serve a movement...

As well as Lawrence's "Kangaroo":

Her sensitive, long, pure-bred face.  
 Her full antipodal eyes, so dark,  
 So big and quiet and remote...

However, we also clearly see a difference in the choice of animals and their

representation. While Lawrence chooses mostly the base, meek and mild herbivores in his poems like the ass, goat, elephants, and so on (with the exceptions of the mountain lion and the red wolf as well as the female dog Bibbles), in his *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, Hughes projects grandeur through most of his animals in the two anthologies *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*, where he selects animals predominantly aggressive and predatory in nature, like the hawk, the jaguar, the otter, and the fox.

Even the cat in his verse has a god-like manner, like in the poem “Cat and Mouse”.

Whether to two  
 Feet or four, how are prayers contracted!  
 Whether in God’s eye or the eye of a cat.

This may be the reason why we see an air of superiority in the animals of Ted Hughes. In Hughes’s poems, we see awe and reverence for the animal world as they appear in a halo of spiritual and supernatural light drawn about them. The animals are quite distant from the human world and they hold a power and position a lot more influential and definitive than humans. We see such an example in “Hawk-Roosting”:

It took the whole of Creation  
 To produce my foot, my each feather:  
 Now I hold Creation in my foot...

Nothing has changed since I began.  
 My eye has permitted no change.

Whereas this wonder for the animal world is also evident in Lawrence’s work, we can quite easily conjecture that he tends to merge the animal and the human world, bringing them together on a distinctively cohesive platform, showing that both worlds co-exist in a single dimension, unlike Hughes’s poems where we see a clear divide between the human and animal world.

Therefore, we may look at Lawrence’s “Elephant”:

The slow beast curiously spreading his round feet for the dust.  
 And the slim naked man slips down, and the beast deposits the lump of wood,  
 carefully.

It is also important to note that Ted Hughes’s animals project extreme hostility in their manner, to which Hughes ascribes the term “vitality”, while dismissing the term “violence”. Nonetheless, there is a raw, animalistic fervour in Hughes’s animal poems, celebrating the grandeur and stateliness of the animal world, as in “Hawk Roosting” and “The Jaguar”. On the other hand, we have the tamed and domesticated animals in Lawrence. Even an animal like the mountain lion appears completely overpowered by the human world, for in “Mountain Lion”, the lioness has been shot dead by two men. There is a sense of resignation in all the animals as they surrender to the selfish purposes of humans. Indeed once they were superior, but now that they have had a tryst with humanity, they have yielded themselves to Man, even though they possess greater

wisdom than Man can ever attain.

Here, therefore, it becomes important to take into consideration the circumstances under which the two poets were writing.

Lawrence resorted to animal poetry after the First World War had left him emotionally scarred. So there is a sense of suffering dominant in the composition of each of these poems. As a result, we see that Lawrence is trying to show that humans are not only destroying each other but also annihilating the natural world by trying to control it. However, there is a conscious awareness that the consequence of Man's actions won't be very favourable for him, as he is completely doomed because of his deeds. There is, thus, a sense of enlightened disillusionment.

On the other hand, we see that Hughes was attracted to the animal world from the very beginning as he modelled animals out of plasticine and also drew animals endlessly in his childhood. He was undoubtedly mystified by the aura of the animal world and its "vitality", which is clearly evident in his poems. Yes, he was influenced by Lawrence's poems but the influence was only limited to the subject matter and a few themes since his philosophy and understanding of the animal persona was antithetical to Lawrence's.

So, even if they both belonged to similar backgrounds and were brought up in similar environs, their outlook to life and poetry were quite dissimilar and unique to each.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, it can be safely assumed that whereas D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes are similar in their principal belief and reverence for the natural world, their treatment of the animal subjects in their poetry is quite dissimilar: for while Hughes is inclined towards the aggressive, the violent and the barbaric brute force of the animal world, Lawrence is more subtle and sublime, relishing the animal wisdom from a passive, stoical perspective.

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