



Research Paper

## Passivity vs resistance : pig symbolism in ted hughes’ “view of a pig” and philip levine’s “animals are passing from our lives”

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**ABSTRACT :** Ted Hughes and Philip Levine are two prominent poets of the twentieth century who adorn a significant position in the field of world literature. While Ted Hughes is a British poet known for his poems marked by an exquisite use of animal imagery, vitality and violence, Philip Levine is an American ethnic poet, a Jewish immigrant, acclaimed for the realistic depiction of working class, especially that of Detroit. As the socio-political milieu that gave impetus to their writing is different, the theme, tone and attitude of their poems also remain different. The paper examines the differences that exist between two poems, one by Hughes and the other by Levine, by placing them on a similar platform which is the centrality of an animal image. The paper also tries to understand the reasons for the different sensibilities that drive in the major themes of the poems.

**Keywords:** Pig, Passivity, Resistance, Violence

### I. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was a period that witnessed massive changes in the socio-political domain, in the form of two world wars, liberation of colonies and destruction of erstwhile empires. The literature of the period saw the rise of new forms of writing with the emergence of modernism, post modernism, impressionism, expressionism, surrealism and so on. Poetry gained a unique importance as a genre that challenged the conventional forms and as one that marked a shift in ideas and perceptions. Ted Hughes rose to acclaim with the magnificence and vitality of animal images used often in a myth-making mode and thus gaining the status of an ‘animal poet’ and also ‘a poet of violence’. For Hughes, power and vitality are the two important principles that contend against death and he always saw the violence of nature, of animals in a positive light as it stood for the primitive, primordial and natural past. Animals, for Hughes, were that which formed part of the unconscious, something that represented the primitive wilderness and a search for the animals is a search for the instinctual wholeness that is associated with the past. Works like *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal* testify to this fact. Philip Levine, though belongs to the same century, deals with a totally different kind of theme and subject. In Detroit where he was brought up, he was exposed to the minority black community and he also achieved an urban experience, both of which influenced in shaping the future poet. One can see a radical departure in Levine’s writings as he moved away from the mainstream aesthetics and developed a working class aesthetics whereby he developed a sympathy for the working class, the voiceless and the marginalised. The glaring absence of the working class in world literature prompted him to be the voice for the community. Often in his poems, it is the positive, defiant, survival spirit of ordinary folks that is shown rather than a weak, suffering, sympathetic picture of the class. The poem “View of a Pig” by Ted Hughes and “Animals are Passing from our Lives” by Philip Levine are unique but are also different in their own ways. “View of a Pig” that forms part of the collection *Lupercal* was published in 1960 and “Animals are Passing From our Lives” which is in the collection *Not This Pig* was published in 1968. Though the time period is almost the same, the sensibilities are different. The grounds of difference are theme, tone and attitude of the speaker, despite the fact that they hold an animal- the pig- as the central subject matter. The paper tries to find out the differences by analysing each poem separately and then reaching a conclusion.

### II. Analysis of “View of a Pig” by Ted Hughes

“View of a Pig” is an expression of the poet’s thoughts and feelings upon seeing a dead pig. As the title suggests, it is literally a view of a dead pig. In the poem, the speaker is an observer of a pig which is dead, which is cut up for slaughter and it truly brings out the cruelty of man towards nature. Like other poems, Hughes

here too looks for the 'quiddity', which is the essence of the lives, much like Hopkins's idea of 'thisness' and 'isness' (here the real 'pigness' of the pig), but unlike other poems where he conveys the triumphant face of the animals, here one sees the lifeless, exhausted face of a dead pig. The initial stanza goes as follows :

The pig lay on a barrow dead.

It weighed, they said, as much as three men.

Its eyes closed, pink white eyelashes.

Its trotters stuck straight out. (Lupercal38)

Here the way the pig is described invites attention. The animal is dead, and it has simply become an object for food. In spite of the fact that it has got a physical greatness, that it is massive and powerful as it weighs even more than three men, at present it is just an aftermath of man's cruelty and selfishness. The closed white eyelashes and the way the trotters are held up straight add to the pitiful state the pig is in. Further description of the pig as 'not just dead', and the affirmation that 'it was less than lifeless' bring out the tragedy of the being deteriorated into a mere object of helplessness. Unlike "Hawk Roosting" or "The Thought-Fox", here the readers are not allowed to marvel at the unique physical capacity of the animal nor would they remain wonderstruck seeing the exquisite and elegant description. Here the predominant feeling is that of sympathy and pity. In fact the description as such does not carry an emotional outpour or lament, but it strikes the attention of the readers with the accompaniment of these emotions. The peak of objectification can be seen in the lines :

It was less than lifeless, further off.

It was like a sack of wheat. (38)

The animal has ceased to be a life-beaming, vital being, rather has turned into an exhausted, lost, lifeless object. Hughes would have been worried about the industrial farming or factory farming, which was gaining momentum in the twentieth century, because of the rise of population and the increasing demand for food. When the food needs began to be commercialised, animals became mere factory products. Here the pig may be one such victim. On the other hand, it can symbolically stand for all the lost motives and purposes, the disillusioned and depressing era of the post war world where all the humane emotions and values of humanity saw a complete erosion. It marks the helpless state of the entire natural world, tortured under the selfish human hands. It stands for the deterioration of affection, love and care man had for the natural world and shows a world that is pole apart from the harmonious co-existence of man and nature. The pig which is slaughtered and dead invites the attention of the readers to feel for the dead and they also become part of the poet's failure to do any action in favour of the animal.

On the one hand, the poet speaks of the animal objectively, and says that he "thumped it without feeling remorse", on the other hand he thinks sympathetically about it even though the emotion as such is not expressed directly. Irony is very much present in these lines :

One feels guilty insulting the dead,

Walking on graves. But this pig

Did not seem able to accuse. (38)

These lines show the callousness of human beings, who feel themselves superior that they feel 'privileged' over the 'inferior beings' who, they feel, can be treated as private 'objects'. The pig in the poem does not even get the respect that death usually invites. It is ironically stated that for humans the lives of animals are not dignified or great, rather it is with a feeling of contempt that they are looked down upon, as they don't even have the ability to respond to the cruelty meted out to them.

The pig is now 'too dead', and has become just a 'poundage of lard and pork', fresh enough for the table. When Hughes says that "Its last dignity had entirely gone", (38) we might even think of the depth of dignity it had in its previous life. Usually the dead live through and in the memories of the living. Here Hughes strongly makes it a point that to remember the life of the pig, the pleasure it had in its previous phase of life, itself is a 'false effort', something which is 'off the point'. Now that the pig is ready for food, the fact that it is a dead animal has been easily written off. Now what matters is the weight of the animal that is really 'oppressing', the trouble of cutting up the entire animal and so on. Once again the selfish motive is drawn in. Even when the gash is seen, it is just 'shocking' to him and 'not pathetic'. Hughes, by drawing in this attitude, underscores the hard-hearted, callous mindset of humans that works against the animal world.

Unlike other poems, it is only towards the end that Hughes talks about the physical qualities of the pig. There he seems to take an appreciative tone but all the words of admiration become futile by the end. It is described as 'nimble than a cat', as hot-blooded ovens and its fierceness is brought out in the act of its biting. But it becomes a vain act in pointing out these things, as Hughes puts it,

Distinctions and admirations such

As this one was long finished with

I stared at it a long time. They were going to scald it,  
Scald it and scour it like a doorstep'. (39)

This ending becomes the reality. The pig cuts out a sorry figure before us and it acquires a complete passivity throughout the poem. The animal is inactive along with the depiction of the failure of the poet. It does not gain the subject position but is objectified as a mute, voiceless, lifeless thing. Through the poem, Hughes evokes a certain kind of sympathy directed towards the animal and not a sense of wonder, admiration or reverence. The tone of the poem thus ends up being sad and sorrowful.

### **III. ANALYSIS OF “ANIMALS ARE PASSING FROM OUR LIVES” BY PHILIP LEVINE**

The poem “Animals are Passing from our Lives” is extremely opposite to Ted Hughes’ “View of a Pig”. When we come to Levine, the perspective, tone and attitude show a significant change. Pig is the central figure and the animal gains the first subject position. Like “View of a Pig”, this poem also has the themes of animal slaughter, industrial farming (where animals simply become market products) and the cruelty of human beings. But more than that, the pig symbolically stands for a particular idea and line of thought in the postcolonial, post-independent era. Unlike the previous poem, this gains a tone of defiance and resistance, and not one of sympathy or weakness or pity.

The pig is the speaker who starts off with a complete positive energy and spirit that attracts the reader’s attention. He speaks of his body, his physique and abilities in a proud, elegant and dignified tone. In fact the idea that the pig is taken to the market to be slaughtered is obtained only after a while. While “View of a Pig” depicted the picture of a dead pig in the first line itself, here death is at a certain distance, imminent and soon to happen, but is never looked at with a sense of fear or apprehension. The opening lines are as follows :

It’s wonderful how I jog  
on four honed-down ivory toes  
my massive buttocks slipping  
like oiled parts with each light step. (Not This Pig 79)

Here one understands the positive tone and energy that is to take the pig all along the way to his death. Unlike the weak face of the pig in the earlier poem, here the pig shows a triumphant attitude, undaunted by the assured fate awaiting him. He is happy and talks of himself in high terms that shows that he values himself a lot and is proud of the way he is. For man, who considers himself as the only dignified being, animals, especially pig, are those that are always equated with dirt and ugliness. By placing the pig as the first speaker, Levine brings in a different perspective altogether as here the animal is presented with utmost dignity and elegance.

The pig which is the central character is a representative of the animal world. Through a defying and challenging attitude that he develops, the entire human race, whose selfishness leads to such unjust approach to animals, is criticised and satirically portrayed. The pig here is also symbolic of resistance. The fact that Levine belongs to the Jewish community and that he is an ethnic poet, and the 1950s and 60s being the periods of liberation and resistance, pave way for reading the poem symbolically with the pig, a third world voice trying to put forth its resistance towards the first world, which is the white dominant world. The slaughter and thus death that remain a certainty for the pig stand for the various suppressive powers that operate to curb the progress of the weaker, voiceless community. Despite that reality that exists, there is a spirit of survival and defiance that he puts forth. He faces death bravely and we tend to feel neither sympathy nor pity, rather a feeling to be part of his invincible spirit of resistance. In fact he becomes ironic, often giving a tone of mockery :

I’m to market. I can smell  
the sour, grooved block, I can smell  
the blade that opens the hole  
and the pudgy white fingers  
that shake out the intestines  
like a hankie. (79)

It is only at this point that we start to know that he is talking about his own death. The way he describes the fingers of the butcher slowly taking out the intestines in a very casual way like one picks up a hankie, shows the criticism directed towards humans as it marks the emotionless, insensitive, cruel approach of humans towards animals. He satirically states that it is the children and the consumers who will be suffering by the sight of the drooling snouts, while the real suffering is for those animals which are slaughtered, including the pig.

It is by the end that the real active, resistant face of the pig is unveiled. He builds up a contrast between the expectations of the boy who accompanies him to the market, regarding his (the pig’s) response when he is taken to the slaughter-house, and his (the pig’s) real face of bravery. The imagery is as follows:

...The boy  
who drives me along believes

that any moment I'll fall  
on my side and drum my toes  
like a typewriter or squeal  
and shit like a new housewife

discovering television,  
or that I'll turn like a beast  
cleverly to hook his teeth  
with my teeth. No. Not this pig .(79)

It is the stoic approach that gains significance here .The pig instead of having a public display of frustration or perplexion, accepts death calmly and peacefully, even to the surprise of the boy. The strong, stoic and powerful face is thus displayed by the end which is a true notion of resistance towards all suppressive powers. The tone of the poem is thus extremely positive and catches the mind of a dauntless being.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

By analysing the two poems, certain conclusions can be arrived at. Despite the fact that it is pig that forms the central concern of both the poems, the way they are depicted are indeed different. The themes such as cruelty to animals, sympathy for the animal world and a criticism of man's attitude as well as of factory farming are well expounded in both. When in "View of a Pig", the pig gains a mere objectified status, marked by passivity and inaction, in "Animals are Passing From our Lives", the pig attains the central subjectivity with the opportunity to talk for himself in an assertive, dignified tone. Hughes presents the pig from a third person point of view (as he looks at the pig from outside and tries to be sympathetic) while Levine gives an insider view. If the tone of "View of a Pig" is one of sadness, numbness or sorrow, in "Animals are Passing From our Lives" the tone is positive and is of strength and resistance. Reading the poems symbolically also calls for a focus on the differences between the two. Thus in many ways, the poems stay close and stay apart. Both are indeed invaluable contributions made by two ever-cherished poets of the century. Readings and re-readings would definitely help in keeping them even more alive and afresh.

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