

The Animal as Abject: Kristeva's Theory of Abjection in Ted Hughes' Bestiary Poems

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Ted Hughes' poetic depiction of animals, arguing that Hughes' bestiary poems construct the animal as a site of both fascination and repulsion, a manifestation of the abject. Drawing on Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982), the study situates Hughes' animal imagery within the psychic drama of abjection, where boundaries between the human and nonhuman, the sacred and the profane, are repeatedly transgressed. Through close readings of poems from collections such as "The Hawk in the Rain", "Thought Fox" and "Crow", the paper examines how Hughes' depictions of violence, instinct, and corporeality expose the instability of human subjectivity. The animal in Hughes' work becomes not just a symbolic natural vitality or mythic power, but as an uncanny image of the human self in its most primal, forbidden, and destabilizing aspects. Ultimately, the paper argues that Hughes' bestiary functions as a poetics of abjection, articulating a modern anxiety about the dissolution of boundaries between the human and the animal, the self and the other, the living and the dead.

Keywords: *Abjection, Ted Hughes, Julia Kristeva, Bestiary Poems, Power of Horror*

Introduction:

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, first articulated in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), offers a profound psychoanalytic and philosophical account of the processes by which the human subject constitutes itself through the rejection or exclusion of what is deemed impure, improper or threatening to identity. Abjection, in Kristeva's definition, is the psychic operation that marks the boundary between the self and the other, the human and the animal, the symbolic and the pre-symbolic. This framework is essential for interpreting the way Ted Hughes' poetry explores the proximity between the human and the animal, and how that proximity evokes both attraction and horror.

Kristeva begins *Powers of Horror* by stating that "abjection is not lack of cleanliness or health. It is what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982). The abject is not merely the disgusting or the

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repulsive; it is that which threatens and challenges the integrity of the self by revealing the instability of boundaries upon which subjectivity depends. It is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982). Abjection occurs when the subject confronts what must be expelled in order to maintain its sense of coherence, bodily waste, corpses, blood, decay, or the animalistic impulses that remind the human of its material, biological base.

For Kristeva, abjection precedes and founds subjectivity. The infant’s first experience of abjection occurs in the primal separation from the maternal body, the initial act of psychic differentiation that allows for the establishment of the self as distinct from the other. The mother’s body, in this regard, becomes the first object of abjection, a “first other” that is simultaneously loved and rejected. As Kristeva poses, “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representative of sex and murder” (Kristeva, 1982). Kristeva repeatedly associates abjection with the materiality of the body, particularly with those aspects of corporeality that remind the subject of its mortality and animality. The sight or smell of excrement, vomit, blood, or a corpse provokes abjection because it collapses the distinction between life and death, subject and object, clean and unclean. She writes, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (Kristeva, 1982). The corpse is emblematic of abjection because it reveals the fragility of human identity, the body that once was “I” becomes an object, a piece of decaying matter. Similarly, bodily fluids remind the subject of its permeability and its dependence on biological processes that defy rational control. The body, in Kristeva’s theory, becomes a site where the limits of the self are both established and undone. One of Kristeva’s most pertinent insights for literary analysis, especially in the context of Ted Hughes’ animal poetry, is her suggestion that abjection marks “the territories of animal” (Kristeva, 1982). The human distinguishes itself from the animal through acts of abjection by repudiating its own instinctual, bodily, and violent dimensions. Yet the animal continues to function as the human’s mirror, the reminder of what must be repressed in order for the symbolic self to emerge. The proximity of the human to the animal is thus inherently abject. The animal represents both the origin and the threat, the unassimilable reminder of a pre-symbolic, instinctual realm. Kristeva’s psychoanalytic framework illuminates how depictions of animals in art and literature can destabilize human identity by evoking the abject residues of the self. When the animal is represented as violent, instinctive, or uncanny, it calls forth the repressed animality within the human, thereby exposing the fragility of the symbolic order.

Theoretical Framework:

To deploy Kristeva’s theory of abjection with the precision this analysis requires, it is necessary to situate it within the broader psychoanalytic and philosophical tradition from which it emerges and against which it presses. Kristeva’s work in *Powers of Horror* is not a self-contained theory but a radical extension and, in certain respects, a critique of the Lacanian framework she inherited. Understanding what she preserves, what she transforms and what she adds is essential to understanding what the theory

can and cannot do when applied to literary texts.

Kristeva inherits from Lacan the tripartite structure of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic and the account of subjectivity as constituted through entry into the Symbolic order, the domain of language, law, and differentiation at the cost of the pre-linguistic plenitude of the Real. For Lacan, the subject is fundamentally split: it comes into being through language but is never fully at home in it, always haunted by the loss of an originary wholeness that was, in fact, never there.

Kristeva does not dispute this account, but she locates a process that precedes even the Lacanian entry into the Symbolic: the process she calls abjection. Before the subject can enter the Symbolic order, before it can take up its position within language and law, it must first perform a more primitive act of separation. It must distinguish itself from what it is not. It must expel, reject and border off the threatening proximity of what Kristeva calls the abject: that which is neither subject nor object, neither self nor other but the disturbing in-between that threatens to collapse the boundaries upon which identity depends.

This act of expulsion is what Kristeva calls abjection. Its paradigmatic object is the maternal body. The infant, in the earliest phase of its psychic life, exists in a state of indifferentiation with the mother without clear boundary between self and world, inside and outside, body and environment. The establishment of the subject requires separation from this primary intimacy. But this separation is never clean. The maternal body, the first abject, is neither incorporated nor expelled but occupies a permanently ambiguous position: too close to be an object, too other to be the self. As Kristeva writes, the abject is “the jettisoned object” that is “radically excluded” and “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Powers of Horror 2). The abject is not what I desire and do not have. It is what I must not be, what I must continuously expel in order to remain a coherent subject.

The features of Kristeva’s account are particularly important for the present analysis. The first is the ambivalence of abjection. The abject does not simply repel, it also fascinates. The subject is drawn toward what it must expel, compelled to approach the border it is in the process of establishing. This ambivalence, the simultaneous horror and attraction that the abject provokes, is what generates the particular affective charge of abject imagery in literary texts. When Hughes’ poems dwell on animal violence, on the hawk’s indifference, on the fox’s predatory darkness, they do not simply depict nature. They enact, in language, the reader’s ambivalent fascination with what must be disavowed.

Poetic language, for Kristeva, is distinguished from ordinary communicative language by its capacity to hold the semiotic and the Symbolic in tension without resolving that tension into transparency. Where ordinary language aims at the efficient transmission of meaning, poetic language exploits the materiality of the signifier its sound, rhythm, weight, and texture in ways that allow the semiotic to press through. The poem is a site at which the drives that the Symbolic order represses find expression without destroying the Symbolic structure entirely. This is what Kristeva means when she speaks of poetic language as a “practice that transgresses symbolization” without abandoning it.

A poetics of abjection, then, is a literary practice in which the content and the form of the poem enact abjection simultaneously. At the level of content, abject imagery of

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the corpse, the predator, the bleeding wound, the violated body confronts the reader with what must be expelled for the human subject to maintain its coherence. At the level of form, the semiotic pressures of rhythm, sound, and embodied language force the reader into affective proximity with what is being depicted: the poem does not allow the reader to contemplate the abject from a safe aesthetic distance but implicates them in the fascination-horror it generates. It is this double operation, abject content held in abject form that distinguishes a poetics of abjection from the mere use of disturbing imagery.

Hughes' animal poems exemplify this double operation with unusual intensity. The formal qualities of his verse, the hammering stresses of his accentual rhythms, the dense consonantal clusters that slow reading to the pace of physical effort, the refusal of the consoling turn or resolution; produce an embodied reading experience that mirrors the visceral encounter with the animal world the poems depict. The form does not merely describe abjection; it enacts it. Reading "The Hawk in the Rain" is an experience of being battered, of submitting to forces larger than the accommodating self. Reading "Crow" is an experience of being stripped of the consolations of meaning. The reader's discomfort is not incidental to the poems' meaning. It is their meaning.

Research Methodology:

This study is qualitative and interpretive in its methodological orientation. It belongs to the tradition of literary critical research, which understands the literary text not as a transparent window onto an external reality but as a complex, multi-layered object of meaning whose significance is produced through the act of reading in relation to theoretical frameworks. Unlike empirical or quantitative research, which seeks to establish generalizable claims through the collection and analysis of data, literary critical research seeks to produce interpretive illumination: to show, through sustained close attention to specific texts, what a given theoretical framework reveals about how literature works, what it does, and what it means.

The research design of this study is accordingly structured around two methodological commitments that operate in relation to each other throughout the analysis. The first is theoretical: the study deploys Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection, as elaborated in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and supplemented by her account of the semiotic and poetic language in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), as its primary analytical framework. The second is textual: the study applies this framework through close readings of selected poems from Ted Hughes' bestiary collections, attending with precision to the formal, linguistic, and imagistic choices through which the poems produce their effects. The primary method through which this study conducts its analysis is close reading: the sustained, methodical, and theoretically informed examination of specific textual moments, individual lines, images, rhythmic patterns, syntactic choices with the aim of demonstrating how meaning is produced at the level of the text's formal particularity

Analysis:

Kristeva depicts that the abject is not simply disgusting but it is disturbingly intimate. It is something that comes from within yet must be rejected for the self to remain

coherent. Abjection thus operates at the boundary between inside and outside, conscious and unconscious, language and pre-language. Hughes's poem, "The Thought-Fox" dramatizes this boundary crisis. The fox is not an external animal observed in nature rather it is a figure emerging from psychic darkness into symbolic language. The poem stages the moment when the unconscious presses into consciousness, a happening that is both creative and threatening, productive and destabilizing. The poem begins with an undifferentiated void as "I imagine this midnight moment's forest." The forest referred in the opening lines is not a literal landscape but a pre-symbolic psychic space, that is Kristeva's chora, which is a site prior to structured language, where drives and instincts circulate. The darkness is significant and abjection flourishes where form dissolves, where identity has not yet stabilized. The speaker's mind is not yet a unified, rational subject but it is permeable, receptive to what should remain hidden. The fox emerges from this space as a border figure, neither entirely internal nor external. As the fox advances, Hughes emphasizes physicality as the "neat prints" in the snow, the "sharp hot stink of fox." Smell, touch, and movement dominate the imagery, privileging sensory experience over visual clarity. Kristeva identifies such sensory excess, especially smell as a hallmark of abjection, because it resists linguistic containment and recalls the materiality of the body. The fox's "stink" is particularly abject as it signals animal presence in its most corporeal and irreducible form, confronting the human subject with what cannot be idealized or aestheticized. The fox in his poem symbolizes abjection. The fox is not observed and perceived as a static object but is something that approaches. As Hughes poses, "It enters the dark hole of the head." This very imagery collapses and dissolves the distinction between animal and mind. For Kristeva, abjection occurs when the boundaries that guarantee the subjectivity break down. The fox is explained through physical and sensory imagery. Hughes writes, "Two eyes serve a movement, that now and again now, and now, and now." This repetitive and rhythmic syntax gives meaning to the fox's body. The fox's movement is instinctual, bodily, and silent. These are the qualities that Hughes associates with pre-rational life. This instinctive force contrasts with the poet's conscious effort to write, suggesting that creativity itself originates in an abject, animal realm that precedes rational language. The fox is not merely heard, it enters the poet's mind as well. The final line, "The page is printed", depicts that poetry is created from the encounter with the abject. The fox, therefore, is not merely a symbol of poetic inspiration but it is the abject origin of creativity itself. Hughes suggests that poetic language emerges from a confrontation with what the subject normally excludes in order to function socially and rationally. The animal is both necessary and threatening, generative and destabilizing. The fox operates within the psyche, exposing the process by which human subjectivity and artistic expression are formed through contact with the nonhuman. Ultimately, "The Thought-Fox" enacts Kristeva's claim that abjection is not merely destructive but constitutive as well. The self comes into being through its encounter with what it fears and rejects. Hughes' fox embodies this paradox, standing at the threshold where darkness becomes meaning, instinct becomes thought, and the animal becomes the unsettling ground of human consciousness.

In the poem "Hawk Roosting," Ted Hughes constructs the hawk as a figure of absolute predatory consciousness, a voice that both fascinates and repels the reader.

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Observed through Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the poem dramatizes the unsettling collapse of boundaries between human rationality and animal instinct, exposing a violent motive beneath civilized subjectivity. The hawk emerges as an abject figure precisely because it embodies what the human subject must repress in order to sustain the illusion of moral order, autonomy, and transcendence. The hawk's opening line, "I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed" establishes a position of sovereign authority. Yet this sovereignty is grounded not in ethical reflection or social law but in bodily instinct and lethal capability. The hawk's consciousness is disturbingly articulate, appropriating human language to justify its violence as it says, "I kill where I please because it is all mine." This fusion of animal instinct with human rationalization generates abjection, as it erodes the boundary between the speaking human subject and the nonhuman predator. The hawk's body is foregrounded as an instrument of death as "my hooked head and hooked feet." Rather than repressing corporeality, the hawk glorifies it. This celebration of the killing body aligns with Kristeva's assertion that abjection is bound to the materiality of flesh and to acts such as bloodshed, predation and death, that the social order must repress to maintain symbolic coherence. The hawk's violence is not chaotic but precise, almost aestheticized, "The allotment of death." This phrase suggests a bureaucratic or divine distribution of killing and unsettling human distinctions between natural violence and moral atrocity. The hawk's indifference to suffering reveals a form of life that does not recognize the ethical weight humans assign to death. The reader's discomfort arises from recognizing that this violence is not monstrous but natural as a part of an order older than human morality. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which "disturbs identity, system and order", the hawk's voice does this by revealing that reason itself may be rooted in primal domination rather than moral transcendence. Corporeality is central to the poem's abjective aspects. The hawk takes pleasure in its physical design, "my hooked head and hooked feet", representing the body as a weapon. Rather than repressing the flesh, the hawk celebrates it, positioning violence as natural, inevitable and even divinely sanctioned as it says, "The sun is behind me" and "Nothing has changed since I began." This assertion of timelessness depicts what Kristeva identifies as the archaic realm of the abject, prior to symbolic law or ethical differentiation. The hawk exists outside history, progress, or guilt, hence exposing the fragility of human narratives of moral evolution. Ultimately, "Hawk Roosting" functions as a poetic enactment of abjection by recognizing the hawk not as an external animal other but as an uncanny reflection of repressed human drives such as domination, violence and the desire for absolute control. The poem destabilizes the human-animal boundary by suggesting that what we cast out as animalistic remains at the core of human subjectivity. In this way, Hughes' hawk exemplifies the poetics of abjection as a bestial figure that embodies modern anxiety about the dissolution of borders between self and other, instinct and intellect. In Kristeva's terms, the hawk embodies what the human subject expels in order to maintain a moral self-image, yet cannot fully escape. Within the broader context of Hughes' bestiary, the hawk represents the most explicit externalization of abjection. Where the fox infiltrates the psyche and the thrush exposes instinctual efficiency, the hawk proclaims domination as a worldview. Together, these figures articulate a poetics of abjection that confronts modern anxiety about the dissolution of boundaries between human and animal, self

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and other, ethics and instinct.

In “Thrushes,” Ted Hughes presents the thrush as an representation of raw instinctual violence, a creature whose sudden and lethal precision unsettles human conceptions of morality, time, and agency. In context of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the poem reveals how the animal becomes a disturbing site where the boundaries between human ethical consciousness and nonhuman instinct collapse. The thrush, like many of Hughes’ bestiary figures, provokes both fascination and revulsion, exposing the fragility of human subjectivity in the face of an older, more primitive order of being. The poem opens up with a striking image of violence. The thrush’s attack is instantaneous and absolute as Hughes writes, “Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn.” The bird’s predatory act is not mediated by hesitation, reflection or moral doubt. This immediacy places the thrush within what Kristeva identifies as the pre-symbolic realm, governed by instinct rather than language or law. The human observer, positioned outside this realm, experiences the thrush’s violence as abject because it confronts the human subject with a mode of existence that precedes ethical differentiation and rational control. The thrushes’ violent act is figured as penetration of the earth, the beak pierces the soil to reach the worm. This downward movement into “darkness beneath the grass” evokes Kristeva’s association of abjection with what is buried, hidden or repressed. The earth becomes a liminal zone between life and death, surface and depth, order and chaos. The worm which is soft, exposed and destroyed, functions as an abject object in Kristeva’s sense and a reminder of bodily vulnerability and mortality. The thrushes’ indifference to this destruction intensifies the abject effect, as the poem refuses any moral framing of the act. Death occurs without drama, justification or remorse, exposing violence as a foundational condition of life rather than a deviation from it. Hughes explicitly contrasts animal instinct with human consciousness as, “Man cannot live by bread alone,” yet humans are depicted as trapped in “a time of darkness.” This darkness is not instinctual but ideological which is a condition shaped by history, abstraction and moral anxiety. Unlike the thrushes, humans are burdened by symbolic systems that mediate action through guilt, doubt and interpretation. Kristeva argues that abjection arises when the subject encounters what it has expelled in order to construct identity. The thrushes embody what humans repress, the capacity for decisive, unmediated violence. Their existence exposes human subjectivity as fragile, over-determined and estranged from the body. The thrushes’ instinctual clarity thus becomes an accusation against human symbolic paralysis. One of the poem’s most unsettling gestures is its challenge to human notions of progress and moral evolution. The thrushes kill “for what they are,” not for ideology, nation or belief. Their violence is immediate and complete, whereas human violence is delayed, systematized, and justified through symbolic narratives. This contrast reveals a Kristevan paradox, human symbolic order, designed to regulate violence, may instead amplify it. The thrushes’ killing is limited and necessary; human violence, mediated by abstraction, becomes limitless. The poem thus destabilizes the moral hierarchy that places humans above animals, producing abjection by exposing civilization as potentially more destructive than instinct. Within Hughes’ bestiary, the thrush occupies a distinct abject position. Unlike the hawk, it does not claim sovereignty; unlike the fox, it does not infiltrate the psyche. Instead, it exists as a limit-figure, marking the threshold between life and death, action and

thought, instinct and ideology. The thrush's terrifying quality lies in its refusal to signify and to stand for anything beyond itself. Kristeva emphasizes that the abject resists symbolization. The thrush cannot be fully assimilated into metaphor or moral allegory without losing its force. Hughes preserves this resistance by presenting the bird's violence as irreducible fact, confronting the reader with a reality that language struggles to contain. "*Thrushes*" suggests that what humans reject as brutal or inhuman is not outside them but foundational to life. The thrushes stand as abject reminders of a pre-moral vitality that both sustains and threatens human subjectivity. In confronting this vitality, Hughes forces the reader to reckon with the unsettling possibility that meaning, morality and identity are built upon the repression of an instinctual violence that never fully disappears.

Conclusion:

Under the theoretical framework of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this paper has argued that Ted Hughes' animal poetry constitutes a distinctive poetics of abjection in which the animal emerges as a destabilizing figure at the limits of human subjectivity. Across poems such as *The Thought-Fox*, *Hawk Roosting*, and *Thrushes*, Hughes repeatedly stages encounters between the human and the nonhuman that unsettle established boundaries between instinct and intellect, corporeality and consciousness, the sacred and the profane. These encounters do not reaffirm human mastery over nature; rather, they expose the fragility of the symbolic structures such as language, morality and history through which the human subject seeks to secure its identity.

Viewed through Kristeva's psychoanalytic framework, Hughes' animals are neither allegorical representations nor mere embodiments of natural vitality. Instead, they function as abject presences that return the human subject to what it has repressed: its own instinctual, corporeal, and pre-symbolic existence. The fox emerges from psychic darkness as the unsettling source of poetic creation, revealing that language itself originates in a confrontation with what precedes the symbolic order. The hawk articulates an uncompromising logic of domination that dismantles the human distinction between reason and instinct, while the thrush embodies a pre-moral vitality whose ruthless precision challenges anthropocentric assumptions about ethical superiority. Collectively, these bestiary figures expose the instability of the human and animal divide and reveal that human identity is constituted not through transcendence of animality but through its continuous repression.

Furthermore, Hughes' poetic technique reinforces this process of abjection. His dense physical imagery, visceral descriptions of violence, and uncompromising emphasis on bodily existence do not merely depict the abject but formally enact it, compelling readers to confront experiences that resist symbolic containment. The poems thus become spaces where the semiotic continually disrupts the symbolic, allowing instinct, corporeality, and unconscious drives to surface within poetic language. Hughes' bestiary consequently operates not only as a representation of nature but also as an exploration of the psychic mechanisms through which identity, culture, and civilization are constructed and continually threatened.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a productive critical framework for understanding Hughes' animal poetry beyond traditional ecological, mythic, or symbolic interpretations. Hughes' animals are best

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understood as figures occupying the unstable threshold between self and other, civilization and wilderness, humanity and animality. By foregrounding this liminal space, Hughes reveals that the greatest source of horror does not lie in the animal itself but in its uncanny proximity to the human. His bestiary therefore becomes a profound meditation on the instability of subjectivity, suggesting that the animal persists as the repressed foundation of human existence and that every encounter with it confronts us with the fragile borders upon which identity depends.

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