

HUMANISM AT THE CROSS ROADS: A CRITIQUE OF TED HUGHES' THE CASUALTY AND PHILIP LARKIN'S AT GRASS

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ABSTRACT

The poets of the modern era such as Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and others have depicted the spiritual and moral decadence of modern man and the absence of humaneness in him through their works. In one modern poem entitled *At Grass*, the aged, retired people are compared to old horses and treated like useless commodities. They await their death as the aged, deteriorating old horses wait for the mass slaughter. The human race is at the cross roads, with no way out and they are unable to take a firm decision. They are alienated and unfavorable as they are cut off from the clad of humanity. They indulge in an endless and futile quest for their own 'self' and they are in a 'state of helplessness' and their maverick attitude is projected in some of the modern poems. It is a state of being and living where the modern man neither care for others nor care for himself.

This paper attempts to critique upon the plight of modern men and the condition of humanism through two poems: Ted Hughes' "*The Casualty*" and Philip Larkin's "*At Grass*". *The Casualty* narrates a flight accident and vividly captures the last moments of the dying pilot and the spectators' attitude towards him. *At Grass* focusses on race horses once celebrated for their celerity are ready for slaughter now. Their past and the present are beautifully juxtaposed and their impending future where they await death is depicted. The plight of modern men in both these poems is to be studied. The projection of modern man and the lack of compassion, love, care and their inhumane condition are to be studied with special reference to these two chosen poems and to substantiate the fact that the objective of these two poets is to enhance humanism and humanly traits in modern man.

INTRODUCTION

When the champions of twentieth century modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound hailed poetry as an intellectual complexity and recondite obscurity, poets such as Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin composed poems in the true spirit of the 'laureate of the common man'. Their poems are marked with individuals who possess no large-scale effect to recommend them to the bardic realm but still managed to spin quotidian legends out of them. The influence of poetic philosophies that Thomas Hardy exerted on Larkin and Hughes is evidently seen in their poems. In one Modern poem entitled *At Grass*, the aged, retired people are compared to the old horses and treated as useless commodities. They await death as the aged, deteriorating old horses wait for the mass slaughter. The human race is at the cross roads, with no way out and is unable to take a firm decision. Modern man seems to be alienated as he severs his relationship with his fellow human beings. He indulges in a futile quest for his own identity and is in a state of disillusionment and dejection and the insouciant life that he lives at times is projected in some of the modern poems. He is in a state of delirium and neither does he care about others nor he has care for himself.

This paper attempts to study the plight of modern man and the status of humanism among them through two poems: Ted Hughes' *The Casualty* and Philip Larkin's *At Grass*. *The Casualty* narrates a flight accident and vividly captures the last moments of the dying pilot and the spectators' attitude towards him. *At Grass*, spotlights on race horses, which were once celebrated for their celerity, are now waiting to be slaughtered. Their past and the present are beautifully juxtaposed and their impending future, where they await death is reflected upon. The plight of modern man in both these poems is to be studied. The projection of modern man and the lack of compassion, love, care and their inhumane condition are to be studied with special reference to these two chosen poems and to substantiate the fact that the objective of these two poets is to foster humaneness in modern man.

TED HUGHES' "THE CASUALTY"

Ted Hughes poetry is primarily concerned with material reality and the larger questions of life and death. His concern for nature and the animal world is unparalleled in the genre of poetry and his depiction of the inner workings of human mind is quite brilliant. Ted Hughes as a poet commands a great respect in English poetry

and his supremacy over the projection of the problems of modern man with elegance in style and beauty enables the reader to consider him one of the greatest poets of his time. He understands very sharply modern sensibility and contemporary issues and projects them in his own perspective and style with great precision. His creation of the animal world in his poetry delights, instructs and stirs the readers emotionally, intellectually and aesthetically.

The major theme of his poetry is man - the nature and purpose of human existence, human beings' relation with the universe, the natural world and his own inner self. Ted Hughes was more concerned and focussed the problem of human consciousness in his poetry and this chosen poem ascertains his major areas of concern. Hughes believed that poetry was part of the self-healing equipment of the psyche. The great poems of the seventies and early eighties had exerted a great influence and inspiration on his writing poetry

In Ted Hughes' *The Casualty*, there was an flight crash where the pilot was caught in fire. The response from the people in the vicinity was compared to the response from the animals. The human beings were as curious as the animals and were just interested in knowing the details about the accident and were unconcerned about the dying pilot and did not have any intent to save his life. The onlookers were bereft of kindness and pity but they just watched the entire scene as a show. The accident happened in a hot summer afternoon and the people's nonchalant and stoic nature could be compared with the unpleasant weather prevailing over there

Ted Hughes captured in a poetic way the episode of the dying pilot and philosophized the predicament of modern man. The presence of the inevitability of death disturbed the atmosphere in the same way as modern modern's life is conditioned and associated with accidents of that sort as depicted in *The Casualty*; the spectators became anxious, curious and inquisitive to know only the details of the accident and not interested in saving the brutally injured pilot. In this context, the sense of indifference and detachment towards the sufferings of fellow human beings of the onlookers was reflected and the same was captured in the following lines:

Far above the trees, between the washing hung out.
They wait with interest for the evening news. (TC 45: 4-5)

The apathetic and the inhumane nature of the spectators was depicted figuratively and compared with three animals: the astonishment of the pheasants; the care for their own safety of the hares and the warning of the wren to other animals as a mere duty.

...in the stubble a pheasant
Is craning every way in astonishment.
The hare that hops up, quizzical, hesitant,
Flattens ears and tears madly away and the wren warns. (TC 45:7-10)

The feeling of astonishment and the warning signal of the animals to others were as similar as that of the traits exhibited by the onlookers who witnessed the accident with great curiosity rather than taking any steps to save the life of the dying pilot. The body of the pilot was compared to that of a snake and a rare flower. The searching process of the body happened in a slow and steady phase and it was compared to that of searching a snake in darkness and that of searching a rare flower.

The cruel and frightening death of the pilot was well captured by the poet in the following lines:

See the grave of dead leaves heave suddenly, hear
It was a man fell out of the air alive. (TC 45: 14-15)

The fear and the ambience of the frightening dark were prevailing everywhere in the poem. The other human beings at the place of action appeared as ghosts and watched the scene as mere spectators. The helplessness and insouciant attitude of modern man at the times of others' casualty was vividly presented through this poem.

Human heart is referred to as a black diamond, a rare specimen, smaller in size; in the smaller heart of human beings, selfishness was the by-word and self-complacency ruled. The selfish and narrow-mindedness of human beings was discussed and thus human heart was compared to that of an unpolished diamond with a lot of impurities and debris. In spite of education, culture and tradition, there were still the presence of the rude and the uncivilized nature of human beings.

... Here's no heart's more
Open or large than a fist clenched, and in there

Holding close complacency its most dear
Unscratchable diamond.

(TC 45: 27-30)

The dying pilot looked at the spectators up and they looked at him with hand-kerchiefs on their mouths. They were not interested in saving the dying pilot but they watched him as mere spectators and were attracted to the scene of the bloody action as the flies were attracted to blood. The dying pilot's approach towards the spectators and their sense of indifference, helplessness and the importance attached to their own safety were reflected in the following lines as,

Grimace, gasp, gesture of death. Till they look down
On the handkerchief at which his eyes stares up.

(TC 45: 33-35)

PHILIP LARKIN'S AT GRASS

Philip Larkin in his poem attempts to bring home that senility or dotage like youth is a necessary part of life and we must accept it calmly. *At Grass* was a serene picture of old age. The race horses symbolized something about success and failure and neglect to notice the threatening atmosphere of the modern social democracy. Larkin's poetry was characterized with a fusion of an ordinary, colloquial style with clarity and a quiet, reflective tone with an understatement. Most of his poems center on ordinary and commonplace experiences. It has to be noted that Larkin's earliest work displayed the influence of Eliot, Auden and Yeats, and the development of his mature poetic identity in the early 1950s coincided with the growing influence on him of Thomas Hardy.

The poem was about the race horses in their retirement. These race horses were no more in their glory; these superannuated horses no longer participated in race. With ease and comfort under the cool shade of trees, they were grazing:

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and main;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
The other seeming to look on
And stands anonymous again

(NCP 110: 1-6)

These horses lost individual identity but fifteen years ago, they were famous with individual distinction in races and achieved glory. A vast crowd of people including the noble ladies used to attain the field of race and stock their money on the horses of their choice.

In this poem, the poet captured the sad plight of the retired horses which were once celebrated. There were no visible movement of life in those horses and in the past, the horses were race horses. Human beings reduced to the state of animals and treated as useless commodities was an undertone of this poem. The horses were successful in more than a two dozen races and their portraits were decorating the restaurants. They were hero worshipped once and everything pale into insignificance by the passage of Time.

The loud cheering noise of the spectators was on the air till the news appeared in the next day's leading dailies. Some of the certain winning horses were restricted and made a little handicapped by putting a load to make the contest more balanced and competitive.

then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street.

(NCP 110: 16-18)

In the next stanza of the poem, one of the horses simply turned its head down which symbolically attribute that the horse turned down its glory.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?
They shake their heads.

(NCP 110: 19-20)

In the positive turn, it could be interpreted that the horse was highly satisfied with the achievements and glory and decided to say 'no' for any further glory; in the negative turn, it could be interpreted that the present moments of defeat and frustration were lingering in the mind and they say 'no' for any continued living in this

world. The horses appeared to have lost interest and pleasures in life and feeling bored and one of the horses just cropped up as nothing was there to hope for the future; to mitigate boredom, the other horse was just watching.

In the last stanza of the poem, the horses were put in the ground and were dumped as unwanted commodities. There were no stop clock to calculate their speed and no binoculars to watch their galloping speed. They wait only for the groom and the groom's boy as they were the messenger of Death and they were carried to the place of mass slaughter.

And not a fieldglass sees them home,
Or curious stop-watch prophesies:
Only the grooms, and the grooms boy,
With bridles in the evening come.

(NCP 110: 21-24)

The human achievements and glories pale into insignificance before the mighty death; the achievements and glories were all transient in nature. The plight of modern man was depicted in both the selected poems and modern man was projected as non-compassionate without any love and was more isolated; the gregariousness of human beings was lost as they were more concerned about self and individual. Glory was written in muddy stuff and Time sweep it off, seemed to be the epitome of the poem *At Grass*. The milk of human sympathy and kindness were lost among the human beings. External forces and assistance were required to make us push and proceed with the routine activities. The human beings' predicament was highly criticized with a sympathetic and humanly concern only to enhance human values.

SUMMING UP

There are lines of fusing similarities and dissimilarities between these two poems as both these poems depicted in vivid terms the plight of modern man, their utter selfishness, the absence of compassion, action and love among modern man and also substantiated the transient nature of achievements and glories. The inhumane condition of the modern man is depicted where they are found to be intolerable, ungrateful and more selfish. In their already smaller hearts, selfishness and self-complacency rule and their position is on comparable grounds with animals. The impermanence of life, glories and achievements before the ravages of Time and Death are depicted through both these poems and the necessity to be humane in the course of life is also advocated.

There is some dissimilarity between these two poems as in *The Casualty* the spectators are human beings and in *At Grass*, the readers are the spectators. *The Casualty* is a more realistic poem and depicted in very plain terms the agony of the dying pilot over the impending death and the indifferences of his own fellow beings towards his agony and physical crisis; whereas the poem *At Grass* is more figurative and symbolic in nature as there are many undertones and with horses as major characters, the poet depicts the plight of modern man. Thus, to sum up, both these modern poems have depicted the plight of modern man and advocate the enhancement of humanistic values.

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