

Sexual Imagery and Male Ego in Lawrence's "Tortoise Shout" and Ted Hughes' "Thought Fox"

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Abstract

Sexual imagery has been a significant phenomenon in modern literature as writers tend to enrich their writings with social taboos and erotic contents. This paper presents the poetry of D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes to show how those writers used sexual images to depict their male-ego, and their manhood. Concentrating on Freud's psychosexual development, and the use of phallic symbols. Through examining Tortoise Shout by Lawrence, and Thought Fox by Hughes, the reader can notice the sexual images that resides behind their stanzas. Accordingly, this paper tries to discover the way both writers present those images.

Keywords: Sexual imagery, Phallic symbols, D.H. Lawrence, Ted Hughes

Introduction

Phallic symbol is a symbolic form of the term Phallus which means the male organ in its erect form. Any object that represents a penis or refers to it is called a phallus. Thus, those objects are precisely addressed as being phallic. In literature writers use phallic symbol to represent fertility and clearly it is associated with their sexual organs and ego. According to psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud, Male gender possesses a penis and this can be related to the reason behind their male-ego. In an essay entitled *The Signification of the Phallus*, in Jacques Lacan's book *Écrits: a selection* (1977), the sexual distinction is clarified according to two different terms "being" the phallus and "having" it, the differences between those terms is shown as the reality of sexual life. Women are the subject of men's desire because men have the phallus, yet they cannot desire it. They praise their organs in their speeches, aiming to reveal their distinctiveness.

The American Philosopher, Butler (1999) explores Freud's and Lacan's ideas about the symbolic phallus, affirming the connection between the phallus and the male organs. She asserts that the phallus is clearly resembles the penis as an "instrument" and a "sign". According to Freud, the child passes through five psychosexual development stages, which has its demands to be fulfilled, otherwise it will cause unstable personality. the third stage is called the Phallic Stage it starts from three until six years. In this phase, the child becomes aware about sex differences, which sets the conflict between being sexually attracted and fear which is called the Oedipus complex by Freud (McLeod, 2019). Lawrence suffered from this kind of psychological problem as he hated his father when he was a child and he had a special relationship with his mother whom he loved a lot. In his writings there are explicit indications referring to sexual images that portrays his male-ego and his fertility. If the demands of the phallic stage are not fulfilled and the child will get stuck in that period of time, this kind of fixation will lead to low self-esteem, egoism, and men who treat female gender with contempt. This is apparent in Ted Hughes case, he treats Sylvia Plath, his wife in a terrible manner that led her to commit suicide and end her life as she felt worthless and unhappy.

Lawrence allows his writings to reflect the social taboos of his society in the years 1910 until 1917, during the time when his famous novels were written. The writings of his novels: *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in love*, and *The Rainbow* confirmed his status as a writer of sexual imagery and erotic content. Thus, the popularity of Lawrence's writing and his reputation were very much connected to its sexual ideas, rather than its artistic qualities (Kelsey & Cooper, 1991). In the essay, *Eros and Metaphor: Sexual Relationship in the Fiction of Lawrence* (1969) Kinkead-

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Weekes explains the meaning of the term “sexual”; it reflects the experience and the act of the body in a specific, limited time, and place; that reaches its intense point in an orgasm. For Lawrence sex is the expression of extreme freedom as well as intellectual independence, it is a way to fulfill human beings’ passion. This kind of writing has become an artistic channel for Lawrence to reveal his feelings about life and the way he portrays it. It is a challenge to the ideology and beliefs of Western society. However, Lawrence reveals a deep sexual awareness in his work from the beginning of his career as a writer, he applies a kind of delicate to moments related to the sexuality of the physical act. For example, a piece of fruit, a flower, and an animal are used by Lawrence to express sexual desire, as a way to emphasize on the idea that human beings are harmonious complex mind and body, soul and blood, intellect and flesh. Centuries of ideological constraints defined the crucial aspects that interpret human existence (Filippis, 2012). Moreover, Lawrence is regularly celebrated for his perceptiveness to sexual mindset and energy, describing it as a psychological and mystical experience that linked to emotional aspects rather than simply physicality (Hawthorne, 2013). He depicts sexuality as a power that bounds individuals at the profoundest level of their psyche, his understanding of sexual interactions is obvious in his poems, he explains sexual moments using poetic delicacy. Natural images and psychological details are main tools that reflect sexuality in his work, for example: birds, season, flowers are all used in a delicate manner enriched with psychological touch to examine how sex influence individuals’ identity. Using a language that is embedded with sexuality but not explicitly to create an emotional mood, because he believes that a real sexual union is not merely physical, but an intertwine of souls, neglecting the mechanical portrayal of sex.

Ted Hughes is one of the greatest British writers of post war period, through his work he adds a special style to the immense tradition of Literature in the west. Possessing a deep imagination which is obvious in his poetry, shaped a new vision of revelatory poetry that gives life to different things to resemble the reality of human beings. In *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes*, Sagar (2000) states that Hughes has such a kind of imagination that not only his six senses, but “innumerable” senses talk through him. Hughes was famous for using the image of animals to represent humans indirectly which avoids him problems and conflicts. Through using animals as a kind of image, Hughes successfully shed the light on different themes like heroism and sexuality.

Through using animals, he presents various sexual images to explore the sexual practices of man in modern ages. King (1979) asserts that Hughes obsession with animals captures the similarities between both the human and the animal world. Adding that the focus on animals in his poetry is a kind of attempt to illustrate his feelings and emotions towards the condition of humans. Poetry lessens the struggles of inner conflict that persist in the mind of individuals, there is a conflict between the desire to reveal the hidden emotions and the restrictions imposed by society which disable individuals from expressing themselves. Hughes is one of those who suffered from these issues, yet he chooses to write about animals to reveal his sexual desire and male-ego. Through poetry he rejects the principles of the modern culture, which served as a healing process that reveal the “secret mental emotions” (Maity, 2013).

Freud states that using myths, fairy tales and legends helps to illustrate basic conflicts and instincts of human unconscious. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud clarified that the impulses of the mind of the poet have their roots in childhood; thus, it reveals feelings, and desires which are not ordinary for conscious awareness. This illustrates both poets, Lawrence and Hughes, desire to reveal their male-ego through different sexual images in their poetry. Not necessarily through myths, those poets refer to animals like “Fox” and “Tortoise” to symbolize sexual desires that disguise in the human’s unconscious mind. Referring to different kinds of phallic symbols to clarify the tie that exists between human and animals.

Analysis

Lawrence’s writing is filled with sexual imagery and phallic symbols to draw the reader’s attention to the importance of sex and desire in his ideology, which is totally the opposite of the prevailed morality of the times. The use of sexual elements in his poetry is a fact that revealed a lot about Lawrence’s life, and it is worthy to refer to these elements in his poem *Tortoise Shout*. In the poem, Lawrence depicts animals but it contains deeper meaning reflected through sexual images. The poem describes the narrator’s experience while observing two tortoises during their sexual union. It presents one of the most frequently discussed themes of Lawrence’s writings: The male-female relationships. In the poem, Lawrence uses the tortoise as a sexual image to reflect male-female relationships, it is totally confusing to use this animal which is far from reflecting the portrait of sexual imagery. However, Lawrence cleverly links the

act of sex in tortoises to the act of sex in human beings because while reproducing organisms those animals' mating system includes vocalizations, and moreover, they produce rhythmic, human-like sounds, and roaring which is inspiring for Lawrence as a male. Galeotti, Sacchi, Rosa, and Fasola (2004) state that "vocalizations and courtship behavior might be costly for males, and if these costs increase differentially for different males, then the potential exists for vocalizations and displays to reveal male individual quality on which females could base their mate choice" (p.301). This clarifies the reason behind choosing the tortoise as a phallic symbol to represent sexual imagery and male-ego in human beings.

Lawrence starts the poem describing a male tortoise which stands as a phallic symbol for male figure, this animal is referred to as "dumb". The poet thought that his silence might refer to the fact that he is dumb but then he hears his "First faint scream" (Lawrence, 1994, 296) which is described as vague, the act of sex is something ambiguous for Lawrence as people try to keep it secret and avoided the subject. For Lawrence, it is totally normal to mention this complicated act and comment on it. He describes the tortoises to be in the climax of their body union act "in extremis", trying to connect the sexual union of the tortoise to the sexual act of human male, as both is symbolized by the act of producing sounds, to show their wild nature and male-ego. By using excessive and explicit sexual image, and phallic symbols for the union of both animals, the poet asks the question "Why were we crucified into sex?" (ibid) as if they are tortured by having this kind of desire. "scream", "yell", "shout" "submission" Lawrence have mentioned all those phallic symbols in the poem clearly to symbolize the act of sex. Apparently, he wishes to be rounded like a ball without any sexual desires and instincts; as he portrays it as a kind of torture to human beings. Throughout the poem, another question is raised "Why was the veil torn?" (ibid), the "veil" and "torn" are sexual images to represent the veil of virginity, which is torn by male figure with a "shriek" and "horror". This explicit sexual image is presented firstly to question the reason behind this kind of torture and secondly to present the male figure in a powerful way. The male tortoise in the poem is a phallic symbol for human male. The act of union of male and female tortoises is completely a sexual scene that presented to reflect the unconscious mind of the poet, "coition", "tupping" and "fragile yell" are terms that mentioned in the poem to describe the full act of sex.

According to Freud's psychoanalysis theory, the fixation on the phallic stage will lead to unstable personality, and this is obvious in Lawrence as he suffers from Oedipus Complex (McLeod, 2019), Lawrence has unusual relationship with his mother, thus the subject of sex is unfulfilled matter for him. In "Tortoise Shout", after explaining the act of sex clearly through using different phallic symbols referring to male organs and their wild sexual nature, he starts to remember his childhood and the kinds of screams that he heard, the scream of "a frog", "a wild goose", "a nightingale", "a rabbit" "the heifer" "cats" "horse" and his mother's singing. Finally, he hears the scream of the male tortoise during the act of sex, which is compared to the wild nature of males during intercourse. For Lawrence, this kind of scream is different from the one he heard in his childhood, this one is characterized to be purely sexual, and it reflects his manhood. Sex is depicted as a mean to break the silence of individuals, and evoke them to find their partner "throughout the universe" (Lawrence, 1994, 297)

Lawrence successfully portrays the act of sex in his poem and he describes it as a war which is followed by a triumph and happiness, this short duration of body union is described accurately and reflected through different words like "torn" and "horror". In the poem, Lawrence identifies something purely human in the call of the male tortoise which is a strange act that human also depend on during sex and enjoys the act. the tortoise calls from the "horizon of life" affirms Lawrence's place in the universe as human beings are connected with all sexual beings. Accordingly, the ability to produce strange sounds is advantageous to males and it reflects their sexual desire. The sexual images that are used in the poem like "scream", "shout", "sex" "submission" and "tiny" brings the mind of the poet into direct contact with the sexual and physical reality of the body. According to Lawrence, the sexual images in his poem is not mentioned to give thrill to his readers but to emphasize on the essential role of sex in life of both men and women (Nazareth, 1963).

The Thought Fox is one of the important poems of Ted Hughes, from his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The poem is enriched with sexual images to reflect the hidden desires of the writer; the poem starts with the scene setting alone by the window at midnight while writing poetry. Then he realizes that he is not alone as he feels that "*Something else is alive*" (Hughes, 1957, p.4). The poet refers to another thing which is alive, using ambiguous language to let the reader explore that thing which is probably his sexual instincts, that is alive; he refers

to his figure as moving, which can be regarded as phallic symbol to represent his male organ. Then when he looks outside his room, there is no star but darkness, he sees a fox sneaking around the forest, which is again a phallic symbol that stands for males; because foxes are famous to be sneaky like males until they convince their female partners to indulgence into the act of sex. Chad Fox (2021) describes Foxes as wild animals whom are unpredictable and they can return to their wild nature in any moment they feel threatened, if they appear to be kind and friendly, humans should avoid approaching it.

In the poem, Hughes uses Fox to compare it to the nature of males, they are unpredictable and they can revert to their wild sexual instincts in unknown times, they feel aroused. They can attract females like the Fox attacks his victim. Through using Fox as a phallic symbol to signify male nature, Hughes reveals his male-ego and sexual desire and compare it to the one that animals have. The poet explicitly refers to his sexual desires and instincts through mentioning to the Foxes "nose" which is a phallic symbol that represents the shape of penis. Being interested in the animal as he is interested in his male organs, praising the Fox is like praising his male organs to reveal his sexual nature as a man. Bandyopadhyay (2013) illustrates that the poet's intellect is replaced by his instincts. In the moment when his sexual desires arouse in midnight, his thinking and interests will be about his male organ. Poetry serves her a mean to reveal the struggle and conflicts inside the mind of the poet, through using phallic symbols Hughes expresses the ideas hidden in his unconscious mind.

In *The Thought Fox*, it is not the night that disturbs the poet, neither the darkness of the sky which is without stars; it is the mysterious ideas in the poet's unconscious mind that disturbs him. The "forest" represents his unconscious, which is full of ideas. At the beginning his ideas and sexual instincts were not clearly referred in the poem, but later when his sexual desire aroused, he used explicit sexual images to reveal his intention. Hughes reveals his sexual impulses from the depth of his unconscious mind to his awareness, "*Till, with sudden sharp hot stink of fox/It enters the dark hole of the head*" (Hughes, 1957, p.4). If we look at the images used in this poetic line from Freud's phallic concept, the word "sharp" is a phallic symbol that stands for the male organ when it is erect, "the dark hole" is a phallic symbol that stands for the female organ. Maity (2013) explains that the fox enters the unconscious mind of the poet, bringing sensual, hot and animal stink, with power and excitement. Hughes attempts to depict an element of his own sensuality that is hidden in the deep layer of his unconscious mind which he does not own or possess.

According to Freud and his theory of psychoanalysis, human mind is divided into three concepts, id, ego and superego. The first one which is called "id" is responsible for the libidinal desires and sexual instincts, Hughes tries to bring forth but in a poetic and controlled form. Thus, he uses the fox in his poem to show the sexual ideas hidden in his unconscious mind, through presenting different phallic symbols. He gives his readers the impression that can present his sexual tendencies only through a protective shell that masks his explicit masculine desires. Moreover, the writing of poetry allows him to reveal his fervent sexual instincts and male-ego in an indirect form.

Conclusion

Writers of the twentieth century like Ted Hughes and D. H. Lawrence tend to enrich their writings with Sexual images and phallic symbols to reveal their male-ego. Through writing poetry and using the image of animals as Tortoise and Fox, they successfully present the idea of sex and male's sexual tendencies. Both poets used different kinds of phallic symbols, for instance, "male Tortoise" "Fox nose" and "sharp" are explicit images that stand for male organ in its erect form. In *Tortoise Shout*, Lawrence referred to the act of union of male and female tortoise to reveal his sexual ideas that is hidden in his unconscious mind. The same with Hughes, through using many phallic symbols, he clearly revealed his sexual desire in midnight, comparing male figure to Foxes that try to catch its victim cleverly. The sexual images that are mostly represented through using animals directly reflect the poet's male-ego, it expresses the nature of men and their uncontrolled sexual desires. Thus, this paper uncovers the sexual ideas that are hidden in the psyche of men. Through using animals to avoid direct criticism, both Lawrence and Hughes expressed their tendencies and sexual instincts through a protective shell that masks their explicit masculine desires.

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