



# The Degeneration And The Plight Of Modern Man In The Poems Of Ted Hughes' *The Casualty* And Philip Larkin's *At Grass*

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**Abstract:** This Paper attempts to study the plight of modern man and the state of humanism through two poems: Ted Hughes' *The Casualty* and Philip Larkin's *At Grass*. *The Casualty* narrate a flight accident and vividly captures the last moments of a dying pilot and the spectators' attitude towards him. *At Grass*, spotlights once celebrated race horses, which are neglected at present due to old age and senility. Their past and the present are beautifully juxtaposed and their impending future, where they await death is focused. The plight of modern man in both these poem is to be studied. The depiction 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 humane traits in modern man

Man is radically different from all other living species as he is estranged and alienated from nature; he is overwhelmed by a feeling of isolation and separation. In the process of evolution, man has lost the pre-human harmony with nature which is enjoyed by other species of the world. It has to be noted that the Twentieth Century is an epoch dominated by scientific advancements, world wars, deterioration of human values, loss of faith in fellow human beings and even in God. His estrangement, not only from the world, but from himself, has become one of the most pervasive characteristics of modern man. Modern man is overwhelmed by anxiety, identity crisis and alienation.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is an exemplary substantiation for the plight of modern man as depicted in the two major characters, Gogo and Didi. Quasimodo, the Italian poet and translator is known for his poetic ripening and his commitment as poet to the plight of modern man brought him the 1959 Nobel Prize in Literature. Quasimodo's *To Give and to have*, and *Debit and Credit*, T.S.Eliot's *The Wasteland* and the *Hollow Man* and Edvard Munch's painting *The Howl* are other important illustrations of the depiction of modern man. The *Howl* painting depicts in highly vivid terms a skull and they are just depicted as mere shadowy figures, in the form of human. The skull is the symbol of modern man who is the lost sheep in the fold of humanity and nobody is prepared to help him out in the quest of identity.

Many poets and writers of the modern period have projected the plight of the modern man and the contemporary society through their literary creations. Some of the notable poets like **Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, T.S.Eliot, W.H.Auden and D.H.Lawrence** have depicted the plight of modern man and the absence of humanism. The modern man is alienated and dislodged from the rest of the humanity. The fruitless search of his self, the 'state of helplessness' and the 'who care attitude' are the other graver concerns as projected in some of the modern poems. Modern man lives in a state where he neither cares for others nor for himself.

In the Two chosen poems for the present study, Ted Hughes' *At Grass*, depicts the plights of the old race horses, which symbolically refers to the aged, retired people. The poem juxtaposes the past glory with the present state of agony and isolation as experienced by the horses that are treated just like useless commodities. The poem focuses the once celebrated race horses, which are neglected at present due to Impending old age and senility. Their past and the present are beautifully juxtaposed and their impending future, where they await death is focused. Ted Hughes' *The Casualty* narrates a flight beings. The poem focuses the last moments of the dying pilot and the spectators' attitude towards him. The plight 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 humane traits in modern man.

Ted Hughes' is primarily concerned with material reality and the larger questions of life and death. He is also concerned with Nature and the animal world, and above all, the inner world of man. Ted Hughes as a poet commands full individual technical superiority over most contemporary issues and depicts it in his own perspective and style. He creates worlds to our delight and instructs us elevates us emotionally, intellectually and aesthetically through most of his poems. The major theme of his poetry is man, the standpoint of human existence, human beings' relation with the universe, with the natural world and with his innerself. Ted Hughes focuses the problem of human consciousness in his poetry and this chosen poem is a standing example for it. Hughes believes that poetry must be a part of the self-healing equipment of the psyche. The great poems of the seventies and early eighties have influenced him.

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

in this paper, the chosen poems are to be juxtaposed through a deeper analysis based on some important parameters like isolation, quest for identity, indifference towards the suffering fellow beings, lack of compassion, the inhumane condition of modern man and the agony of death. In Ted Hughes' *The Casualty*, there is an air crash and the pilot is totally burnt and thrown out of the cockpit. The response from the people in the vicinity is compared to the response from the animals. The accident happens on one hot, summer afternoon and the people's indifferent, dispassionate, unemotional mind is on comparable grounds with the hot weather. The sense of isolation is also depicted through Philip Larkin's *At Grass*, where the once celebrated horses are left uncared as anonymous beings; they are no longer useful due to impending old age and senility. The past glory of the pilot with the present state of isolation and the past glory of the race horses with their present identity of isolation can be juxtaposed and the deterioration in the identity and the quest of the real identity is also focused.

In both these chosen poems, the sense of indifference is greatly depicted. The indifference can be substantiated through the spectator's response towards the dying pilot. The human beings are as curious as the animals and they are just interested to know the details about the accident and not concerned about the dying pilot and do not have any intention of helping him. The milk of human kindness is lacking in them and they just watch the entire scene as a show.

Far above the trees, between the washing hung out.

They wait with interest for the evening news. (TC 45: 4-5)

The behavior and the attitude of the spectators are depicted figuratively and compared with three animals: the pheasant looking astonished, the hares are concerned only with their safety and the wren merely warning other animals.

...in the stubble a pheasant

Is carrying every way in astonishment,

The hare that hop up, quizzical, hesitant,

Flattens ears and tears madly away and the wren warns. (TC 45: 7-10)

The spectators' attitude is projected as inhumane and it is on comparable grounds with that of the curiosity of animals. The loss of identity and the juxtaposition of past glory and the present state

of isolation and indifference are seen applicable to both the dying pilot and the supernatural horses.

Then one crops grass, and moves about  
-The other seeming to look on – And stands anonymous again. (NCP 110: 3-6)

Ted Hughes' captures in a poetic way the episode of the dying pilot and philosophies the predicament of modern man. The impact of the all- pervasive death disturbs the atmosphere and it gets echoed in the other poem also. The cruelty and the frightening death is best captured by the poet in the following lines such as,

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 are prevailing everywhere in the poem. In the other poem, the supernatural horses' past and the present are juxtaposed and they have nothing to wait except the grooms and the grooms' boy symbolically referring to death and the impending death over the race horses is best captured through the following lines.

Only the grooms, and the grooms boy,  
With bridles in the evening come. (NCP 110: 29-30)

Human heart is referred to as a black diamond, a rare specimen, smaller in size; in the smaller heart of human beings, selfishness is the by-word and self-complacency rules. The narrowing down of human heart and its selfishness is discussed and thus human heart is compared to that of an unscrutable diamond with a lot of impurities and debris in *The Casualty*. There are still the signs of the rudeness and the uncivilized nature among human beings in spite of education, culture and tradition.

... Here's no heart's more  
Open or large than a fist clenched, and in there  
Holding close complacency its most dear  
Unscrutable diamond. (TC 45: 27-30)

The dying pilot looks at the spectators up and they look at him with the handkerchief on their mouths. They are not interested in helping the dying pilot and they watch them as spectators and are attracted to the scene of the bloody action as the flies are 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 are 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)

To extrapolate the concept, selfishness subtly echoes in the other poem where the once celebrated horses are left to isolation and are treated as "anonymous again" (NCP 110: 6). The once hero worshiped horses who are in the midst of cheering crowd are now left alone at the mercy of death where they await the impending death. There are no stop watch to measure their speed and no field glasses to witness their galloping speed.

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
Or gallop for what must be jot,  
And not a fieldglass sees them home,  
Or curious stop-watch prophesies: (NCP 110: 25-28)

The race horses are celebrated and their names are decorated in the restaurants of the towns in the past. In the present, as they are superannuated horses they lost their name and fame. The loud cheering noise of the spectators is on the air till the news has appeared in the next day's leading dailies.

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 turns its head down which symbolically attribute that the horse turns down its glory.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?  
They shake their heads. (NCP 110: 19-20)



They shake their heads in disapproval because memories and past glories are short lived in them. Human beings are reduced to the state of animals are treated as useless commodities during the old age is an undertone of this poem. The horses successful in more than a two dozen races and their portraits are decorating the restaurants. They are hero worshipped once and everything pale insignificance by the passage of Time.

The human achievements and glories pale into insignificance before the mighty death; the achievements and glories are transient in nature. Modern man is projected as passionate and isolated; the gregariousness of human beings is lost as they are more concerned about self and individual. Glory is written in muddy stuff and Time sweeps it off, seems to be the epitome of the poem *At Grass*. The milk of human sympathy and kindness are lacking among human beings. External forces and assistance are required to make us push and proceed with the routine activities. Thus, it can be summed up that through both these poems, the predicament of modern man is highly criticized with a sympathetic and humane concern and with the objectives of enhancing human values.

There are lines of fusing similarities and dissimilarities between these two poems as both these poems have depicted in vivid terms the plight of modern man, their utter selfishness, the absence of compassion, action and love and also substantiated the transient nature of achievements and glories. The inhumane condition of the modern man is depicted as 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 necessarily to be humane in the course of life is also advocated.

There are lines of dissimilarities 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 plain terms the agony of the dying pilot over the impending death and the in differences of his own fellow beings towards his agony and physical crisis; whereas *At Grass* is more a figurative poem, symbolic in nature as there are many undertones band with horses as major characters, the poet has depicted the plight of modern man. Thus, to sum up, both these modern poems have depicted the plight of modern man and advocated the enhancement of humanistic values.

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