

# DICTION AS THE REVELATION OF FEMININITY: A STYLISTIC APPROACH TO TED HUGHES' "THE RIVER IN MARCH" AND "SHEEP"

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of "Diction as the Revelation of Femininity: A Stylistic Approach to Ted Hughes' "The River in March" and "Sheep" is to examine the diction employed in Ted Hughes' "The River in March" and "Sheep." The present research paper adopts a stylistic approach to explore the choice of words that have assisted the poet in bringing forth femininity in the selected poems. His dexterous usage of the English language has grabbed him a revered position in the field of English literature. Ted Hughes, a Poet Laureate and an eminent poet of the twentieth century, is a self-reflecting poet who has strived to understand the complexities of the creative process. His language is singular, and his poetic style is lucid and fluent, stressing nature and its objects. Critics have commented that Hughes' interests in the Yorkshire dialect and the traditional oral literature have contributed to play a distinguishable role in the tone of his creative composition. His poetic language is enhanced with rhetorical devices, and the language he has employed has motivated him to carry out the present research. It employs the definition of personification as the stylistic toolkit to scrutinize the enriched poetic language in order to detect how diction reveals femininity in the respective contexts.

**Keywords:** diction, femininity, she, personification

## INTRODUCTION:

Edward James Hughes, referred to as Ted Hughes, was born in West Yorkshire and lived between August 17, 1930, and October 28, 1998. He had been a Poet Laureate from 1984 to 1998, which took him to the height of popularity. He was born eleven years after the end of the First World War and nine years before the start of the WW II. He began breathing the air of England that was polluted by poverty and political divisiveness. Living in rural Yorkshire has given him the memories of suffering, and his early poetry has many implications to the stories that he heard in his childhood. As a boy, he invested much of his time in shooting and fishing expeditions along with his brother. His writings validate that he admired the beauty and violence of nature and was obsessed with animals.

Ted Hughes occupies a position between the juncture of the Modern Age and the Post-modern Age. He has carried out experiments with stylistic aspects such as semantic deviation, dramatic deviation, and condenses imagery. He has given no importance to refined mannerism and intellectualism. In 1957 Hughes' first book of poetry, *Hawk in the Rain*, was published and received immediate acclaim and affirmed him as the leading exponent. He was an animal poet and a poet of war, portraying the agony of less privileged people; therefore, he is just apposed with the war poet, Rupert Brooke. "Out and Dust As We Are" is the epitome of Hughes's War poem, which picturizes the pathetic life of the people who have lost their family members in the

war and the traumatic experience that war imposed on them. His poems carry numerous themes and great imageries, thus rendering space for multiple interpretations. Poetry, for Hughes, is a magical and powerful mode to reach feelings and emotions, which are referred to as subconscious and natural energies.

**OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of the present research is to examine the diction employed in Ted Hughes' "The River in March" and "Sheep." It explores the choice of words that have assisted the poet in bringing forth femininity in the selected poems.

**METHOD:**

The present research has selected "The River in March" and "Sheep" as the primary text. These two poems are extracted from Ted Hughes' collection of poems entitled *Season Songs*. The poetic language of the selected poems is focused on using content and language analyses to achieve the objective of the research.

**METHODOLOGY:**

The choice of words used by a writer is considered diction. In literature, diction has a paramount significance as it functions as the pillars for creating any work of art. The usage of diction differs from age to age. In the age of Shakespeare, the diction employed in literary works was different from that of diction used in the Romantic age. The romantic writers endeavored to communicate their thoughts in the rustic language to reach the layman. Likewise, the diction used by the modern age writers makes a vivid distinction from other ages. Ted Hughes has employed diction according to his taste and potential. As for as Hughes is concerned, his animal poems have a different word choice than his nature poems. This study focuses on that aspect to bring out how femininity is portrayed, and it takes a stylistic approach to analyze the text. Stylistics, a linguistic approach to a literary text, focuses on the literary text in general and poetry. Norgaard et al. have attempted to define it as a study to explore the manners in which the text produces meaning in the particular context. Paul Simpson has affirmed that stylistics analyses the creativity present in the language. Since poetry is an exactly suitable text to make a stylistic approach, the present research has chosen the poems of Ted Hughes. His poetic language is enriched with stylistic devices, and the present study focuses on that to elicit the femininity dealt in the text. To explore femininity sketched in the poems, the present study analyses personification employed in different contexts. Femininity means the qualities regarded as the characteristic of a woman. The present study looks at femininity through the lens of personification and explores how femininity is disclosed through poetic language. Personification "represents an inanimate thing as if it were human" and "gives human qualities to animals, objects or ideas" (Fredrick et al., 13). The study applies the definition of personification as the stylistic toolkit to scrutinize the poetic language to detect how diction reveals femininity in the respective contexts.

**INTRODUCING THE TEXT:**

Hughes has embellished "The River in March" with the stylistic device, personification. He begins the poem telling that the river is rich, but her voice is low, and the sea is her mighty majesty. She travels through the village incognito. Suddenly, the poet switches over to a melancholic mood and portrays the river as a poor one without any music. Now she is poor, and no music is heard from her. The poet accuses Winter of ruining her and writes that "She squats between draggled banks, fingering her rags / and rubbish" (Hughes 15).

Once again, the poet switches to the blithe mood and utters that the river is currently rich. The poet can hear music now and entertains himself. The cloud above the river is described as

the 'lofty cloud.' Hughes takes a switch over again to sketch the gloomy picture of the river. She is portrayed as thin and weak where "All her bones are showing" (Hughes 15). In no time, the poet leaps from a somber mood to a joyous mood and accentuates that she is rich now with a plentiful of minerals in her. She is rich and fat now as the rain poured out. She has left one percentage of water in the field and drinking the rest of the water.

Hughes makes a paradigm shift from his cheerful mood to picture her as a poor one: "Now she is East wind sick" (15). The brassy sun gives her a headache and has deteriorated her to become poor and hide in holes and corners. She has lost all her minerals, and now she is shivering. Fish which she treated as her treasure, is no more with her. She is desolated and all alone to make her survive. Once again, the poet promotes her to be rich, and now she is elated. She is visualizing her lands, and "A hoard of king-cups spills from her folds, it blazes" (Hughes 16).

Like "The River in March," "Sheep" also has the function of personification. This poem is divided into three parts, and each part focuses on a single idea. The first part portrays the young lamb, referred to as 'he.' He is said to be a naughty creature for whom the mother longs eagerly. The mother is referred to as 'she' who constantly carries for her child to come close to her. Since she did not see her child, she starts shouting noisily. Hearing this, the naughty and active boy runs to his mother. The naughty boy runs away from the mother and entertains himself. For him, death is more interesting; therefore, he is reckless, and eventually, he dies tragically.

The second part of the poem is dominated by the determiner 'her' and the pronoun 'she.' This part emphasizes the mother sheep in her repeated cries. The poem describes a kind of quest that the mother sheep does to find her son. She cries full-throated to get the son beside her. However, she loses her son, and like a human mother, the mother sheep could not tolerate the grief of losing her son. The poet has penned the mournfulness and heavyheartedness of the mother sheep. It also portrays how she is physically made beautiful and nude when her fleece is cut off.

In last part of the poem portrays that the mother has come back from shearing, and now she has come back to her place. The third part of the poem depicts the resilience of the mother. It pictures her as a mother recovery from losing her son and minding to keep herself active and delight. The new birth that the mother sheep inherits psychologically is transparently dealt with. Then the mother begins a new life with the other group of young sheep. The young sheep cry and call the mother constantly.

#### **ANALYSIS:**

In the poem "The River in March," Hughes sketches an aesthetically appealing river. The river is personified, and her femininity is spurred by employing personification. The river is portrayed as a prosperous river, and very soon, the poet switches to a poesy mood and depicts her as a poor river. His depiction frequently keeps shifting from a merry mood to a melancholic mood. Therefore, the river gets rich and poor positions in the portrayal of Hughes. She is presented with all the respect of a woman. The poet renders human qualities to her to grant a liveliness to the composition.

There is no doubt that Hughes has spruced up the poem with the function of personification. Personification has taken a dominating position to enhance the diction and beauty of the poem. The poet introduces the femininity of the river through the determiner 'her': "Now the river is rich, but **her** voice is low. / It is **her** mighty Majesty the sea / Travelling among the village incognito." (Hughes 15). The first two lines of the poem carry the determiner 'her' to

represent the river. Though the river is an inanimate thing, the poet treats the river as a human being and equips her with all the characteristics of a woman to portray her majesty. The diction that Hughes has employed strengthens the idea of the poet.

In the second stanza of the poem, 'her' is repeated to reconfirm the function of personification: "The winter floods have ruined **her** / **She** squats between draggled banks, fingering her rags / and rubbish." (Hughes 15). Both the poetic lines carry 'her,' and that reaffirms the river as a woman. Likewise, the third person feminine pronoun 'she' used in the second line provides more human qualities to the river. It is mentioned that Winter has spoiled her. The poet is accusing Winter of its inhumane act of ruining the beautiful river. He goes further to attribute human qualities to the river stating that she is squatting and fingering. Generally, human beings do such actions, but the poet accentuates that the river has involved human activities. In this context, the beauty of the stanza is elevated by the choice of words. The femininity of the river is revealed through personification, and personification is made realistic by attributing human qualities to the river.

The poetic lines of the fourth stanza validate the function of personification and the choice of words in the appropriate context. It highlights the presence of the stylistic device, personification through the words: 'her' and 'she.'

The river is poor again. All **her** bones are showing.

Through a dry wig of bleached flotsam, **she** peers up

Ashamed

From **her** slum of sticks. (Hughes 15)

The river is described as a poor skinny woman whose bones are visible to the poet. He observes her gaunt physic and feels pity. He renders human characteristics to the river while stating her as bony and "Through a dry wig of bleached flotsam she peers up / ashamed" (Hughes 15). The word 'ashamed' adds more human quality to the river and qualifies the function of personification. Generally, this word is used for human beings, but the poet poses himself as a novel poet with an engaging style and fabulous diction. "Ashamed", 'she' and 'her' present in the extract proves the quality of diction that the poet has used.

The poet continues to attribute human qualities to the river, and the fifth stanza of the poem validates this claim. Here, the poet depicts the river as a rich one with all minerals in her. She is elegantly portrayed as a beautiful woman with all richness of the world. She is enriched with water and treasures. Now she has surplus water to consume and regenerate her life. This stanza takes 'she' at one instance: "Rain brought fatness, but **she** takes ninety-nine percent" (Hughes 15). 'Rain,' 'she,' and 'fatness' shed light on the attribution of human quality to the river, and the word 'she' indicates the femininity of the river. The diction that the poet has employed has assisted him in bringing forth a realistic picture of the woman in this context.

The poet continues his narration about the river, and this time it is in a somber tone. In the sixth stanza of the poem, one can find the repeated use of the third-person singular feminine pronoun: 'she.' The presence of 'she' is marked five times, and the function of 'her' is noticed twice in the stanza.

And now **she** is poor. Now **she** is East wind sick.

**She** huddles in holes and corners. The brassy sun gives

**her** a headache.

**She** has lost all **her** fish. And **she** shivers. (Hughes 15)

The extract mentioned above depicts the river as a shivering poor woman because of losing her minerals and treasure. The fish that lived in her is referred to as treasure. The poet has been

acutely observant to display the present condition of the river. The brassy river has terribly affected her with headaches, and thus she has become poor. Hughes wanted to convey that the river has dried up because of the firing sun, leaving her with no water. When the river is empty, certainly the fish living in her must also die. To communicate this idea, the poet has attributed feminine qualities to the river and treats the river as a woman who is ruined and lost. 'Huddle' and 'shiver' present in the extra reaffirm the function of personification and the embellished portrayal of the river. These words are commonly used for human description, but Hughes has taken a revolutionary approach to accentuate the femininity of the river.

The last stanza of "The River in March" also points out the function of personification and the revealed femininity. Hughes sketches a blithe river in the seventh stanza and attributes all human qualities to her. In addition to the function of personification, the presence of pathetic fallacy is evident in the poem, and the following poetic lines highlight it.

But now, once more, **she** is rich. **She** is viewing **her** lands.

A hoard of king-cups spills from **her** folds; it blazes, it

It cannot be hidden.

A salmon, a sow of solid silver,

Bulge to glimpse it.

The reoccurrence of 'she' and 'her' are vivid in the extract mentioned above. Twice 'she' and 'her' appear in the given context. This repetition has assisted the poet in embellishing the poetic language with the choice of words. The present participle form of the verb view is 'viewing,' which has been fixed in a suitable place to deliver meaning to the context and add more femininity to the river. Human beings 'view' things, and the inanimate things remain motionless to state that they have no life. Hughes has taken an innovative approach to give life to the inanimate objects of nature. To render this effect, the poet has employed suitable diction to convey the idea. The diction used in the last stanza has fabulously resulted in underscoring the function of personification and pathetic fallacy.

In "Sheep," Hughes portrays the love of a mother sheep for her son. He is jubilant, so he moves away from her and entertains himself. The mother could not tolerate this; therefore, she cries with her full-throat to bring him near. The poem springs out stating that the mother sheep has stopped crying, which indicates that she had been crying all this time, and now she has set herself free from the action of crying. Soon after this scene, the poet sketches a picture that highlights the cry of the mother sheep once again because she could not find her baby.

The sheep has stopped crying.

All morning in **her** wire-mesh compound

On the lawns, **she** has been crying.

For **her** vanish lamb. Yesterday they came. (Hughes 41)

Those mentioned above four poetic lines shed light on personification's function, thereby rendering femininity to the mother sheep. It is vivid that the extract takes the occurrence of 'her' twice and 'she' only once. The determiner and the third-person singular feminine pronoun validate and reconfirm the function of personification. The poet ascribes human quality to the mother sheep through the words. 'Crying' is commonly used in the context of the human being, but the poet has gone a step ahead to employ it in the context of representing the action of an animal.

Hughes has decorated the poem "Sheep" with the function of personification. This device makes its remarkable function in: "Towards where **she** had removed too. **She** knew / He was not right, **she** could not" (42). The third-person singular feminine pronoun appears thrice in these

two poetic lines. The poet ascribes human qualities to the mother and the son. The mother is figured as more caring like a human mother, and the son is depicted as naughty and indifferent like a human son. It is mentioned that the son was not right in his behavior, and the mother could not make him out. The poet has ascribed distinct human features to both the mother and the son. By rendering these qualities, the poet makes his composition active and live.

The mother feeding her baby is realistically verbalized in "When we sat his mother on her tail, he mouthed **her** teat" (Hughes 42). The poetic line highlights the function of personification and transferring the femininity ascribed to the mother sheep. The boy is not interested in drinking milk; rather, death seemed incredibly attractive to him. Thus, he is dead "with the yellow birth-mucus" (Hughes 42). Consequently, the mother started crying in **her** full-throat to express her grief: "Now his mother has started crying again." (Hughes 42). Like a human mother, the mother sheep also cries and records her pain of losing her son. The poet wants to convey that loss is sad irrespective of being a human or animal. The grief of losing a baby is felt by the creature of the human world and by the creature of the animal world. The diction that Hughes has selected to communicate this idea and though has assisted him ideally to bring out the idea in an impeccable manner. The poet has decided to attribute human qualities to the creature of the animal world; therefore, he has been brilliant enough to handle it with the assistance of personification.

The poet describes her as "Poor old ewe!" (Hughes 43), who "[. . .] peers around from her ridiculous / position." (Hughes 43). The careful search of the ewe is depicted in this poetic line. She is portrayed with all femininity, showing that she has a heart similar to a human's heart filled with concern and love for her child. Her femininity is spurred through the illustration of the poet and the following lines validate it:

Eyes deep and clear with feeling and understanding  
 While **her** monster hooves dangle helpless  
 And a groan like no bleat vibrates in **her** squashed  
 Windpipe  
 And the cutter buzzes at **her** groin, and **her** fleece piles  
 away (Hughes 43)

The aforementioned poetic lines delineate the melancholy of the mother sheep. She is immersed in deep sorrow and gets obsessed with the thoughts of her son. She cries profusely and eventually gets exhausted and could cry no further. The poet reports that her windpipe is squashed that she is unable to cry loudly anymore. Deep sorrow has submerged her by making her fail to make further steps with her 'monster hooves. The poet describes the pathetic condition of the mother sheep by ascribing human emotions and feelings. He renders human qualities to her and elevates her position in the minds of his readers. His emotional depiction of the plight of the mother sheep pleases sympathy. The credit of attributing human qualities to animals goes to the poet because he has cleverly employed the right diction in the appropriate context. The above extract sheds light on the reoccurrence of 'her,' which has been used four times. The word 'her' reappears in the poetic lines and ascribes human quality to the mother with the assistance of the personification.

In the poetic line: "And the cutter buzzes at **her** groin and **her** fleece piles" (Hughes 43), the poet has placed 'her' twice to grant femininity to the mother sheep. She is covered with fleece which gives her beautiful physic. Now her fleece is removed by a cutter which adds to her grief. Already she is engulfed by the melancholy of losing her son, and now her beautiful fleece

is cut off. The poet continues to depict her body and the exact picture of hers in the stanza mentioned below:

Now it buzzes at **her** throat, and **she** emerges whitely  
 More and more grotesquely female and nude  
 Paunchy and skinny, while **her** old rug, with its foul  
 tassels  
 Heaps from **her** as a foam-stiff, foam-soft, yoke-yellow  
 robe (Hughes 43)

In the above extract, the presence of 'her' is noticed thrice, and the function of the third-person singular feminine pronoun is highlighted once. With such usage, the poet has been able to sketch the alluring picture of the mother sheep. Now the cutter is removing her fleece and making her nude; thus, she looks whiter now. Removing her fleece has added more beauty to her appearance. As soon as her fleece is cut off, she looks too white, and she could intensely feel that she is female and nude. The word 'nude' is generally associated with the human world, but the poet has journeyed beyond the pinnacle to offer a human position and quality to the mother sheep describing her nude. It is recorded that when she is nude, she could feel her femininity more. It is not that she has failed to feel her femininity so far. The poet has adopted a clever technique to attribute human qualities to the mother sheep. For this, he has employed the words such as 'female' and 'nude.'

The poet has enriched "Sheep" with an exceeding femininity and the second part of the poem substantiates it. He has employed 'she' and 'her' multiple times to elevate the position of the mother sheep by attributing human qualities to her. 'She' and 'her' stand independently and shed light on the femininity of the sheep. The following poetic lines point out the technique that Hughes has adopted in delivering femininity:

Numbered all over, **she** suddenly feels much lighter  
**She** feels herself free; **her** legs are **her** own, and **she**  
 scrambles up  
 Waiting for that grapple of hands to fling **her** down again  
**She** stands in the opened arch of his knees; **she** is facing a  
 bright doorway (Hughes 44)

The phrases such as 'suddenly feels much lighter,' 'she feels herself free,' and she is facing' ascribe human qualities to the mother sheep. In the above extract, the poet has placed 'she' in five different contexts and 'her' in three different contexts to ascribe femininity to the mother sheep. Personification that is employed in this context has spurred the poet to choose appropriate words to deliver femininity. The poet recites that her fleece is cut off from her; therefore, she is free. Her burden has been removed from her physical body, but the mournful mode does not vanish from her. Still, she is in profound sadness as she has lost her son.

As she has lost her son, she is unhappy and lost all her strength. She is sorrowful that she has lost her strength to stand steady. She is weak and unable to cry to express grief. However, cutting off her fleece has supported her feel lighter physically. However, psychologically, she is still in the clutches of grief that she cannot fight and have victory over. From the above extract, it is transparent that the poet first attributes human feelings and emotions to the mother sheep through the appropriate diction that he has selected. Then he attempts to render femininity to the creature that is introduced. "**She** feels herself free, **her** legs are **her** own, and **she** / scrambles up" (Hughes 44) highlights the femininity that the mother sheep receives in Hughes' depiction. She is

described as wholly set free from fleece physically, but her psychological factor is not disclosed; therefore, it is still remarked as an unanswered question.

The poet continues to vouchsafe human qualities to the mother sheep through personification. More than focusing on personification, the depiction of Hughes draws attention to the diction that he has employed. The poetic lines mentioned below shed light on the femininity elicited through diction and the techniques used:

With a real bleat to comfort the lamb in **herself**  
**She** trots across the threshold and makes one high  
 clearing bound  
 To break from the cramp of **her** fright  
 And surprised by **her** new lightness and delighted

**She** trots away, noble-nosed, **her** pride unsmirched.  
**Her** greasy winter-weight stays coiled on the foul floor,  
 for somebody else to bother about.  
**She** has a beautiful wet green brand on **her** bobbing  
 brand-new backside,  
**She** baas, **she** has come off best. (Hughes 44)

In the above extract, the function of personification is lucid, and the highlighted words justify its function. Hughes has used 'she,' 'herself,' and 'her' to attribute femininity to the mother sheep. This choice of diction has not failed to deliver the poet's intention. 'She' appears five times in the extract mentioned above, and 'herself,' the reflexive pronoun, is employed only once in the extract across the poem. 'Her' is used five times in the extract. This shows that the poet wishes to enrich his poem with the right choice of words and ascribe sufficient femininity to the mother sheep in his portrayal.

The above-mentioned poetic lines disclose that the mother sheep has recovered from her agony, and now she is back to her normal state. Her grief has disappeared over time, and this is depicted in the line: "And surprised by **her** new lightness and delighted" (Hughes 44). Her femininity is revealed through the words such as 'lightness and delighted,' '**her** pride unsmirched,' '**She** has a beautiful wet green brand,' and '**she** has come off best.' Now she is portrayed as light and delighted mother, having come off her grief and baas instead of crying. She has entered into a bright phase of her life.

## CONCLUSION:

The poet has attributed femininity to the mother sheep with the assistance of personification. His right choice of words has permitted him to ascribe femininity to the river and the mother sheep. "The River in March" and "Sheep" have been penned enticingly using an exemplary style to captivate the thoughts of his readers. His use of 'she,' 'her,' and 'herself' have added more meaning to the femininity he has decided to deliver. The picture of the river has immensely contributed to the femininity that Hughes wanted to, and the portrait of mother sheep too in no way functioned below the average expectation of the readers. Hughes has dramatically figured the portrait of the river and the picture of the mother sheep. The dramatic picturization

has assisted the poet in attributing an ascending stature of femininity to the river and the mother sheep.

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