

Primal Instincts of Nature in *Pike* by Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes's poem *Pike* delves deep into the raw, primal instincts of nature through the lens of a predatory fish, the pike. Hughes, known for his fascination with the natural world and its often brutal realities, masterfully uses the pike as a symbol of nature's unyielding and instinctual drive for survival. The poem intertwines vivid imagery, unsettling observations, and an underlying sense of menace to reveal the untamed and sometimes violent forces that govern the natural world.

The Primal Nature of the Pike

From the very beginning, Hughes establishes the pike as a creature embodying pure, unadulterated instinct. Described as "Killers from the egg," the pike are portrayed as inherently violent, suggesting that their predatory nature is not learned but innate. The use of "killers" so early in the poem sets a tone of brutality and inevitability. The line "malevolent aged grin" further personifies the fish, giving it a sinister and knowing expression, as if its predatory instincts are a conscious, deliberate force.

Hughes's attention to the pike's physicality also reinforces this primal energy. The pike is "perfect / Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold." The word "perfect" is crucial here—not in a moral sense but in the sense of a creature perfectly adapted to its environment, honed by evolution to be an efficient predator. The imagery of "green tigering the gold" not only evokes the pike's camouflage but also compares it to a tiger, another apex predator, emphasizing its stealth and danger.

Violence and Survival

The poem does not shy away from the harsh realities of survival in nature. Hughes provides a chilling account of pike cannibalism:

"Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,

And four and a half: fed fry to them—

Suddenly there were two. Finally one.”

This stark progression from three pike to one is a powerful representation of the “survival of the fittest” mantra. The act of cannibalism is not presented with judgment but as a matter-of-fact reality of nature. It is a world where only the strongest or most cunning survive, and the instinct to kill is as natural as the instinct to eat or breathe.

The phrase “jungled in weed” reinforces this, as the tank is not a safe, controlled environment but a microcosm of the wild, where the laws of nature still apply. The glass of the tank does not create a barrier to the pike’s instincts. Even in captivity, the pike remains a primal force.

Nature’s Indifference and Menace

As the poem shifts to the speaker’s own experience fishing for pike, the sense of danger only intensifies. The lake is described with an eerie stillness, a “darkness beneath night’s darkness,” which creates a foreboding atmosphere. Hughes taps into the primal fear of the unknown, the hidden dangers beneath the water’s surface.

The tension between man and nature is palpable. The speaker feels a sense of vulnerability, “A pond I fished, fifty yards across, / Whose lilies and muscular tench / Had outlasted every visible stone / Of the monastery that planted them.” Here, nature is timeless, enduring beyond human constructs like the monastery. The lilies and tench, symbols of life, have survived while human history has crumbled, underscoring the idea that nature operates on a different, often unforgiving, timescale.

The speaker’s realization of his own smallness and fragility is captured in the line, “The hair frozen on my head / For what might move, for what eye might move.” This is a moment of primal fear, where the hunter becomes the hunted. The pike, representing the darker forces of nature, inspires a kind of awe and terror that is instinctual.

The Cycle of Life and Death

At its core, *Pike* is not just about the ferocity of a single species but about the universal cycle of life and death. The pike's instincts are a microcosm of the broader natural world, where every creature must struggle to survive. Hughes does not romanticize nature but presents it with a stark realism that acknowledges both its beauty and its brutality.

The final image of the poem, with the pike beneath the surface, "Stilled legendary depth," leaves the reader with a sense of unresolved tension. The word "legendary" elevates the pike to a mythic status, a timeless force that lurks in the subconscious. The pike's presence is both literal and metaphorical, embodying the unseen forces that drive all life.

Conclusion

Ted Hughes's *Pike* is a powerful exploration of the primal instincts that govern the natural world. Through vivid imagery and unsettling observations, Hughes crafts a portrait of a world where violence and survival are intertwined. The pike, as both a character and a symbol, serves as a reminder of the raw, often unsettling truths of nature. In presenting these truths, Hughes challenges the reader to confront their own place within this natural order, where the primal instincts of nature are never far from the surface.