

Admiration and Exploitation of Animals: An Economic and Ecocritical Reading of Ken Smith's "Duke at Haldon Ponds"



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ABSTRACT: This paper sets out to do an economic and ecocritical reading of Ken Smith's poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" using natural and utilitarian animal rights theories and ecocriticism. Our argument is that human-animal relationship is always dominated by the conflict of admiration /friendship and exploitation with the latter always the winner of the former. At the end of the study, it was found out that human exploitation of animals dominates human admiration and friendship of them with man always the winning or gaining partner in this animal-human relationship, paradoxically at the same time being the admirer of animals and their friends and at the same time their killer. Ken Smith in his poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" is unmistakably and overly an animal rights despoiler, a true and prototype anti-protectionist/liberationist, with his unpretentious slaughtering of animals as seen in this Haldon Pond duck.

KEY WORDS: Admiration, friendship, exploitation, economic, ecocritical and animal protection.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the world there has always been a relationship between humans, animals, plants and nature. This is seen in the *Book of Genesis* when in six days God created Nature, plants, animals and lastly human beings. This paper looks at the relationship between human beings and animals as portrayed in Ken Smith 's poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds". There are many relationships between humans and animals like religious, cultural, political..... but this paper focuses on two of these relationships which are admiration/friendship and exploitation/ economic. A quick look at the poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" by Ken Smith reveals that it is a poem of 16 lines divided into two parts; the first part of admiration and then friendship, that is the first ten lines and the last six lines which show the exploitative nature of animals by man. This paper therefore contends that human relationship with animals is dominated by the conflict between admiration and exploitation with the exploitation side always the winner over the admiration side.

This paper therefore sets out to answer these questions : who benefits from human animal relationships ? Can an admirer of animals equally be a killer of animals? What explains that somebody who has made friendship with animals kills and eats them? Is friendship possible between animals and humans? Where do we label Ken Smith in this poem: animal protectionist or animal anti-protectionist ? Is the poet a promoter of animal rights/welfare or a despoiler of animal rights/welfare?

The poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" is a very short poem of Ken Smith which is online.

"Duck at Haldon Ponds"

At evening watches the duck slow feeding the waterline.

Praises the duck- such a fine white miracle breasting the mayfly.

Green of her tail feathers.

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Space of her neck double in water paddles off with my mind

Ducks I have known

Old duck mates of mine

Inspecting the meeting of air and liquid

Make no mistake duck

I'd like to eat you well cooked

One bell battered Sunday in April

And I'd wear your gorgeous feather in my hat,

Make a soup of the bones

And give your leftovers to the cat

(internetpoem.com)

Who is even Ken Smith, author of "Duck at Haldon Ponds"? According to *Wikipedia*, he was a British Poet who was born on 4th December 1938 at Rudston, Yorkshire and died on 27 June 2003. He had 7 prose collections, 20 collections of poems, three literary awards: Gregory, Lannon and Cholmondeley. He was equally an editor.

The son of a farm labourer, Smith had an itinerant childhood. "His father (a farm worker and then greengrocer shopowner) whose life he explores in early poem "Family Group", moved around, and Ken attended Junior schools all over the country"(www.poemhunter.com) He attended Leeds University and studied with Geoffery Hill, Tony Harrison and Jon Silkin from 1963 – 1972. He co-edited *Stand Magazine* with Silkin, "a politically radical and socially engaged magazine"(allpoetry.com)

When he went to America in 1969, he taught in Slippery Rock State College, College of the Holy Cross and Clark University.

Then in 1973 he returned to England and taught at the University of Leeds as the Yorkshire Arts Association Creature Writing Fellow from 1976 – 1978.

In 1977 he founded the *South West Review* literary magazine and was its editor until 1979.

He married Anne Minnis in 1960 and they had one son and two daughters. This marriage was later dissolved. In 1981, he married the poet and artist Jude Benson and became the step-father to her son.

In 2018 *Stand Magazine* published a special edition on Ken Smith, a celebration issue which would have been his 80th birthday.

Ken Smith is known for his "minimalist style"(allpoetry.com) and for his gritty realism and unflinching exploration of urban life, history and the human condition"(allpoetry.com). "He was particularly drawn to the stories and struggles of marginalized communities, giving voice to those often overlooked in main stream literature"(allpoetry.com)."Smith continued to travel widely and his poems remained eclectic"(allpoetry.com)." A twin concern was the concept of borders- geographical, historical, psychological"(poetryarchive.org).

There are two theories of animal rights defenders according to Josephine Donovan in her paper titled "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory" in the book titled *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. She says contemporary animal rights theory includes two major theoretical approaches, one based on natural rights theory and the other on utilitarianism. The major theoretician for the natural rights position is Tom Regan, whose primary statement appears in "The Case for Animal Rights"(1990). She says, Regan builds his case primarily by refusing Kant who had stipulated man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself not merely as a means, that rational beings possess "absolute worth" and therefore they are entitled to treatment as ends. It is on the basis of their rationality that humans are identified by Kant and other enlightenment thinkers as moral agents who are therefore entitled to such natural rights as to be treated as ends (1990).

She adds that in building his case for animal rights Regan extends the category of those having absolute worth or inherent value to include non-rational but still intelligent non-human creatures. These creatures are animals.

She says the utilitarian theory comes from Jeremy Bentham's book titled *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) who wrote "the day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could be withholden

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from them but by the hand of tyranny"[171]. The Utilitarian theory of animal rights is built on the assumption "that the common condition that unites humans with animals is sensibility, the capacity to feel pain and experience pleasure" (172). She ends "thus both Bentham and Rousseau advocate that natural rights or entrance into Kant's kingdom of ends be accorded to creatures who can feel (171), that is who are sentient. Animals feel like human beings. She tells us that the primary advocate of the Utilitarian theory of animal rights is Peter Singer, in his famous book titled *Animal Liberation* that largely galvanized the current animal rights movement.

Ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"(Glotfelty xviii). It was coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". It was revived by Cheryll Glotfelty from what had been earlier called "the study of nature writing as pointed out by Branch and Grady. As Dilek INAN and Merve Nur BolDan put in "An Ecocritical Reading of Ted Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting'" the theory supports eco- over enviro- because enviro- is anthropocentric, centers human, and implies that humans are surrounded by everything which is not them, the environment, while eco- implies inter-reliant societies, incorporated systems, and strong bonds between components parts"(Glotfelty and Fromm,xx). Branch and Grady say ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, since it is used in order to comprehend "the connectedness of all things, including the life of the mind, and the life of the earth". Cook highlights the extensiveness of ecocriticism with its interdisciplinary approach including ecology, topography, environmental history, philosophy, cultural studies and literature among other fields.(56). Ecocritical approaches can be chronological, metaphorical educational, hypothetical, psychological, methodical, or it can include combination of the above. One of the major challenges of the theory is comprehension of the nature and culture as intermingled rather than separate components of a dualistic construct(Armbruster 4). Ecocriticism is the study of culture and its products namely, literature, scientific theories, and art works, and its associated with human relation to nature(Dilek and Merve 56). Ecocriticism or environmental criticism has the following proponents: Cheryll Glotfelty, William Ruerkert, Lawrence Buell and Harold Fromm. Its tenets are anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, ecology, environmental justice, landscape, place or space, ecofeminism, ecotourism, species sustainability, biocentrism or ecocentrism, biodiversity or conservation, ecospirituality, brownfields, deep ecology.... In his Ph.D thesis at the University of Leeds titled Ecocritical Reading in the Poetry of Ted Hughes, Chaiyong Tongsukkaeng says eco- is derived from the Greek oikos which is "the home place of dwelling"(19). Anthropocentrism names any stance, perception or conception that takes human as the centre or norm.(12). It sees this natural world as a homogenized entity and economic resource, or as an expression of cultural values that humans can make use of. In other words, anthropocentrism alienates non-human nature so that it is always out there as relevant to human utility (12). Some of Ken Smith's poems that we can use ecocriticism are: "Fox Running", "Colden Valley", "Family Group", "In praise of vodka" and "Malenki Robot"

1. Admiration and Friendship with Animals

In his famous poem "Talking Turkey", Benjamin Zephaniah admires, goes ahead to make friends with a Turkey and condemns their killing on Christmas days as food. Ken Smith in his poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" which is also set in England admires, goes ahead to make friendship with animals but endorses the killing of ducks on a religious day which is probably Easter, the greatest feast in Christian calendar when he writes "once bell-battered Sunday in April". Which Christian feast is celebrated in April? Only Easter. The Christian feasts on Christmas and Easter usually witness the massive killing of animals. How many animals are killed on these two religious days are uncountable. In the same light, how much money is made on these two days from killing animals is also uncountable. "Bell-battered" Sunday suggests singing and ringing of bells and music.

In the first seven lines of this poem, we see Ken Smith admire a duck at Haldon ponds in Devon, South West England. In lines 8, 9 and 10 we see him make friendship with this duck. Will what motive do he make this friendship? The answer is in lines 11-16. In the first seven lines we therefore see the poet who watches in the evening the duck which is feeding slowly on the water line. He praises it. This duck has a fine white miracle mayfly on its breasts. Its tail feathers are green and shortly we shall see what these feathers will be used for. Its neck is doubled in water and has good space as it paddles off in water. It also paddles with his mind.

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We humans are the ones who paddle a canoe or bicycle. This paddling gives human qualities to this duck, a kind of anthropomorphism or personification.

Like in Robert Browning's celebrated dramatic monologue poem in the Victorian period in English literature titled "My Last Duchess" in which a duke talks about how he killed his last duchess, implying that he had many duchesses before and had killed them all and eventually will kill the beautiful daughter of a count if she does not respect his nine hundred years old title of duke among other reasons, this duck is just one that Ken Smith has killed /known. He has known many before and will proceed to kill them and eat the duck after his admiration and friendship or we call it his fair-weather friendship: "ducks I have known / old duck mates of mine" who have been in the air and in water".

In line 3 he says "praises the duck". Why does he praise the duck? Because of the way it moves on the waterline slowly feeding by eating a mayfly which foreshadows the way the poet will also kill and eat the duck in lines 11-16. He equally praises the duck because of the use he will make of its feathers in lines 11-16. The words "fine" and "praises" are positive expressions of admiration just like the word's miracle, paddles, inspecting and gorgeous. Miracle and inspecting suggest this duck have spiritual or divine connection qualities as it inspects the meeting in the air sky/heaven and liquid/earth/sea.

Briefly the first ten lines of this poem show us how the poet Ken Smith moves from admiration to friendship which is just a smoke-screen or guise or mask to kill and eat the Haldon Pond ducks. Allpoetry.com says "The poem presents a speaker's complex and ambivalent feelings towards a duck. Initially, the speaker admires the duck's beauty and grace ("white miracle breasting the mayfly"), even associating it with spiritual devotion ("praises the duck"). However, the speaker's perspective shifts as the poem progresses, revealing a desire to consume and exploit the bird. This duality reflects the speaker's own inner conflict, torn between the desire to satisfy one's physical needs"

2. Economic Exploitation of Ducks

In this second part of this paper analysis, we look at two economic activities which Ken Smith brings out in his poem which are mainly meat-eating and feather/fur wearing. Human beings make a lot of money from meat-eating and wearing of feathers/fur/animal skin. In her paper titled "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection between Women and Animals" Lari Griven writes this of the impact of the fur industry:

"The same media manipulation of women and physical mutilation of animals are used by the fur industry. This industry in addition can also be indicted for playing on class differences for profit. Wearing furs, the industry informs us not only beautifies and glamorises women but also bestows upon them a "high class status". Wearing the skins of dead animals empowers women, we are told. But again, all it does is reduce women to objects who inadvertently serve the profit and pleasure interests of men. One fur coat requires the death of 4 to 5 leopards, 3 to 5 tigers, 10 lynxes, up to 40 raccoons or 35 to 65 mink (71).

In "The Feminist Traffic in Animals" Carol J. Adams says this of meat-eating:

As the ecofeminist task force recommendation to the 1990 NWSA conference argues "meat eating has dire environment consequences such as deforestation, unrecyclable animal soil erosion, heavy water consumption, unrecyclable animal excrement and immense demands on energy and raw materials. Trafficking in animals also has consequences for our health. The recommendation identified the correlation between flesh consumption and heart attacks, breast cancer, colon cancer, ovarian cancer, and osteoporosis (210).

In this article she tells us the proper use of the word "traffic" when she writes that through the use of the phrase "feminist traffic in animals I wish to politicize the use of animal's bodies as commodities. The serving of animal flesh at feminist conferences requires that feminist's traffic in animals, that is, buy and consume animal parts and announces traffic in animals. The production, transportation, slaughter and packaging of animal's bodies". (181).

Carol J. Adams in the preceding excerpt forgets to talk about the impact of meat-eating when it comes to economic activities which produce much more money.

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Lines 11-13 talk about meat-eating in Ken Smith's poem when the false friendship and admiration of human beings give way to the real nature of human beings who only want to make economic gain from the duck's meat. The poet tells the duck friend of his for many years that "make no mistake duck/ I'd like to eat you well-cooked/ one bell battered Sunday in April". He wishes to eat the duck's meat on a religious day which is Easter. He will not only eat the meat of the duck, he will eat its bones and give the rest to his cat which surely, he will eat one day for the cat is his friend now, who says he is not fattening the cat to eat it one day? The poet does not want anything of the duck to remain, even the bones. This is human greed, and fake egoistic friendship with animals.

Like animals from whom we take skins, we take from birds like the duck feathers/furs after eating their meat and use these feathers as part of human dressing especially in our hats. This is seen when the poet says "I'd wear your gorgeous feathers in my hat". This is the second economic aspect he will make of the duck after eating its meat.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to do an economic and ecocritical reading of Ken Smith's poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" using natural and utilitarian animal rights theories and ecocriticism. Our contention was that human-animal relationship is always dominated by the conflict of admiration/friendship versus exploitation with the second always the winner of the first. At the end of this study, it was realized that human exploitation of animals dominates human admiration and friendship of animals with man always the gaining party or partner in human animal relationship, paradoxically being at the same time an animal admirer and an animal exploiter or killer. Ken Smith in his poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" is unmistakably and outrightly an animal rights despoiler, a true anti-protectionist/liberationist without mincing words and an unpretentious slaughterer of animals. As allpoetry.com puts it "Overall, the poem presents a thought-provoking examination of human relationships with the natural world, exploring the tension between admiration and exploitation". It adds "The time period of the poem also plays a role, as it was written during the mid-20th century, a period marked by both social and environmental change. The speaker's desire to consume the duck could be interpreted as a reflection of the era's increasingly consumerism and exploitation of natural resources"

NOTES

1. Ken Smith's poem "Duck at Haldon Ponds" is online at internetpoem.com. It is one of the poems in Contemporary British Poetry we teach in our MA course in UB titled "Topics in Contemporary British Poetry" with the course code of BLT605.
2. The biography of Ken Smith is taken from *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia* with slight modification at en.m.wikipedia.org.
3. In his famous dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" Robert Browning the celebrated Victorian poet after Alfred Lord Tennyson presents to us a duke who sets out to point out the weaknesses of his last/former duchess and by so doing he unwillingly or unconsciously tells us his own weaknesses.
4. Benjamin Zephaniah is a Black British poet with parents from the Caribbean. His famous poem "Talking Turkeys" belongs to Contemporary Black British poetry which is a kind of performance poetry. He uses "patois/creole/pidgin" English to express himself in this poem. We also teach his poetry in two courses in UB: BLT605 : Contemporary British Poetry" and BLT604 : "Seminars in Black British Poetry and Culture". I have also written a paper in his poem "Talking Turkeys" titled "Animal Protectionist or Animal Anti-Protectionist?" Towards a Liberation of Animals from Human Oppression/Patriarchy. A Textual Reading of Benjamin Zephaniah's "Talking Turkeys" which is online.

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