

Deconstructing The Confluence Of The Classical And The Modern In Ted Hughes' Poetry; Analyzing The Intricacy Of Myth, War, And Modernity In The Selected Anthologies

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Abstract

Ted Hughes is bound to occupy the central position in the historical and literary account of the mid-twentieth century. Often regarded as the 'shaman' of the animal-centric world by literary scholars, the poet, explicitly exercised various techniques to illustrate the conditions of the modern man, challenged psychologically and spiritually by the atrocities of the war. Nature is not served by the poet as the idyllic scene of serenity, but as an equivalent to the soil of the earth irrigated by Man's blood. Resorting back to the primitive and classical foundations of human civilization, Hughes critiques through the non-human entities the 'illusions' of the modern Man. This paper attempts to scrutinize the poet's understanding of human kind in the post-war era, and the conflict of cynicism and humanism, by deconstructing the 'classical' and the 'modern' elements feasted in his poetic genius. Moreover, the research will delve into the seamless blending of the clarity of the myth, the trauma of the war, and the obscurity of the post-modern world, by taking into consideration the prominent anthologies of Hughes – *Prometheus on his Crag* (1973) and *Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) – where the poet explicitly illustrates through the caricatures of Prometheus and the Crow the contemporary attitude of the men and women, their obligation to self-examine their actions as Prometheus does, and their cynicism battling with their humanity as the Crow does.

Keywords: Myth, Modern, War, Human, Non-Human

Locating Ted Hughes In The Anxieties Of The Post-Modern World

'If the discovery of the Return is indeed the end of philosophy, then the end of man, for its part, is the return of the beginning of philosophy. It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think.' (Foucault, 373)

Post Modernism, though is chronologically located post the Modern era of Eliot, Joyce and Woolf, as an aftermath of the Second World War, yet its theories and principal philosophies

were formulating with the emergence of Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida in 1960's. . It appears quite intriguing that where Nietzsche's assertion on the death of God paved the footpath of existential crisis, Foucault's assertion on the 'death of man' paved the road to a 'new' space where, philosophers contemplated on the ambivalence of existentialism, as evident from the extracted words of Foucault. The *Order of Things* was not then was only a critique of modernity and humanity, but also the foundational structure on which post-modernist philosophies were constructed. It was amidst the formulation of the intellectual opinions that ranged from 'post-modernism' to 'post-structuralism' and 'deconstruction', that the poet within Ted Hughes emerged with his literary genius that was soon acclaimed as an athletic conjunction of the non-human and the human; of myth and of war; of truth and of religion.

A critical study of the background of the Post-Modern world, brings forth on the canvas the panorama of the human populace, not juggling between the Monarchy and the Parliamentarians, not struggling to demand for 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity', but rather thriving in a state of 'motionless existence', amidst the trivial display of power-superiority. Having accumulated the anguish of the First World War from their fathers and grandfathers at the battlefield, to witnessing the Great Economic Depression, the rise of Hitler and the Nazi invasion of Poland, the brutality of the holocaust, concentration camps and the massacre of the nuclear weapons – the contemporary human had rejected all probabilities of resurfacing truth. With the end of the Second World War in 1945, the entire globe including the Great Britain was in ruins, and the same had been reflected in the literary ink that penned the literary theories, criticisms and narratives, which formed the crux of Post-Modernism. Tracing back to the words of Terry Eagleton, the intellectual construes the movement exhibiting " a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives, or ultimate grounds of explanation"(Nayar, 72).

Ted Hughes, or Edward James Hughes, having born in 1930, during the pinnacle years of the Modern Era, cultivated his psychological, philosophical and literary canon through the interwar years and the Second World War. Witnessing on one periphery the devilish frolics of death and butchery, and on the other, the rural landscapes of his native quarters – Yorkshire, England – Hughes' experienced in his growing years a bipolar contrast of 'human actions' and 'the enigmatic nature'. A contemporary of Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney, a quick glance at the biographical details of the poet reveals not only his immense fascination towards mythical legends and folklores, and the wild realm of the non-human cosmos, but also discloses the poet's acquaintance with the first-hand experience of the battlefield as an active participant of the Royal Air Forces ; his academic inclinations towards archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge; and, his disturbed marital association with Sylvia Plath which forms the major content of his '*Birthday Letters*'. An insight analysis of these details surfaces the converging junction of all Hughes' inclinations moving towards his sole target – the non-human interiority in the human externality, as the poet writes in one of the letters addressed to Moelwyn Merchant;

‘It occurred to me fairly recently that my preoccupation with animal life, which was obsessively there waiting for me when I became conscious, was a natural gravitation towards whatever life had escaped the cultural imprint. These separate things – my wild life, my mythology and a series of dreams which had recurred since I was quite young showed me that something about shamanism explained or incorporated everything that concerned me. I made the association, somehow between the world of animals, which is excluded by culture, and the “real thing” in humans – the part which our own culture tortures, i.e. sacrifices, crucify.’ (Letters, 1990)

These extracted words sums it up all – Hughes’s seamless blending of Nature, Myth, War and Modernity in his literary careers that begins with *The Hawk in the Rain*, and advances to *Wodwo*, *Lupercal*, *Prometheus on his Crag* and *Crow*. In contrast to Sewell’s *Black Beauty*, and Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the animal is not voiced as an ‘object’ of human brutality, but rather is comprehended parallel to it. Hughes, through the portrayal of his Nature explicates the animal violence as a natural function to the great chain of being, quite ironical to the contemporary human violence which appears trivial and traumatic to the modern, urban, common man.

“Hughes’ poetry from his first book to the last can be regarded as expressing one poet’s personal myth of his quest for what Keith Sagar has called the ‘healing truths’, that both he himself and his society needed. For Hughes, the poet, one way of achieving such insights is by taking a shamanistic approach to thinking and writing about animals” (Cambridge, 40). Ceasing to exist amidst the post – modern world, which resolved to remain ambiguous on truth, reason, identity and objectivity, the poet, in his quest, complicated the ordinary site of meditation, to the harbours of the brutality of Man’s undertakings. Entrusting the non-human province, a superiority over their ‘conscious counterparts’, Hughes de-camouflages the superficiality of the ‘modern urban space’; of ‘glorified patriotism’; of the ‘power of the Divine’. A Poet Laureate of Britain, and also one of the animal spheres, Hughes, has been searching for junctures where human energies could be seamlessly reconciled with the non-human cosmos. Hughes’s in his poetic genius exemplifies a microcosm of the post-war postmodern society – detached from the mythical beliefs, summoned by the glimpses of war, and apprehensive of its religious truth – through its ‘oneness’ with the savage domain of the troposphere, not in the façade of morality, but in the reality of instincts.

Exploring The Modern Man In The Classical Prometheus

In the Introduction to *“Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes”*, Stuart Hirschberg writes, “Throughout his career as a poet, Hughes’ continuing absorption with the psychological, moral, social, and religious symbolism derived from ancient mythologies bespeaks a mind trying to re-establish touch with the heritage of a long vanished past” (Hirschberg). Attempting to liberate the fragmented minds of the individual human, and the collective society, the post-modern poet, targeted the primitive rudiments and foundations of human civilization. The history of Mankind reveals an entrenched reliance of socio-cultural norms on mythical legends and oral folklores across diverse cultures. Myth, as Hughes simplifies in his seminal prose works –*Myth and Education*, steers the vehicle for “negotiations between the powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world” (Myth and Education, 151).

It appears quite intriguing that the poet within Hughes immersed himself into the contemporary attitudes of the day by invoking mythical shades in the modern spectrum as evinced in his selections from *The Hawk in the Rain* (1954), *Lupercal* (1960), and *Wodwo* (1967), which re-accounted the mythical legends across diverse cultures to illustrate the violent and savage instincts of animality, and their parallels to modern humanity. However, what appears more intriguing is the re-casting of classical myths in the context of modern temperament – critiquing the primary institutions of humanity that has been fragmented and alienated post the Second World War. One while keeping Hughes’ inclination towards myth, and wilder realms of nature must not unnoticed the encounter of his younger self with the first-hand experiences of the battlefield through his guardians, much before Hughes himself participated in the Royal Air Forces. Consequently, Hughes envisaged the ‘glorified’ institution of the war only in the terms of torment, agonies and anxieties – the modern man transgressing the confines of Nature and humanism, not ‘inventing’ the path towards scientific and industrial production, but ‘inventing’ the path towards the frolics of death and butchery, quite similar to the Greek Titan God, Prometheus.

Thomas Bulfinch in the Glossary to *Bulfinch’s Mythology* explicates the Greek mythical being, Prometheus, as “the creator of man, who stole fire from heaven for Man’s use”, sparking a contention with the Olympian God – Zeus, the principal power in the divine realm of Greek mythology (Bulfinch, 489). Substantial narratives of the myth claim Zeus, being disgruntled by the transgression of Prometheus, reprimanded him to eternal torment; Prometheus was bound to a rock-like structure, where the God would be impotent to shield himself from the Vulture that would devour his liver. Though, structurally, a twenty-one sequence of verified narratives, recording the self-examination of the Titan God on his act of transgression, yet metaphorically, it bespeaks of the modern man, who has committed a crime similar to that of Prometheus, and is now at the present moment tied up with his burden, waiting for the Nature to consume and engulf him, releasing from the eternal torment of nothingness.

The initial sequence though is organized in the spectrum of progression, stage by stage, beginning with the rhetorical question, ‘*Am I an eagle?*’ (Moortown,67), to being conscious of his own strength and accepting the vulture as an internal demon, imbued in his own dark energies, it is through the later sequence that one figures Hughes’ establishment of the classical Greek myth and the modern English reality. The critical eye in the post-war world, assumes the Prometheus on his crag as the modern man bound to a stiffened rock, after having performed the frolics of death and butchery, only to wait for his end, as Prometheus himself posed – ‘*Was this stone his grave this cradle*’ (Moortown,74). Positioning Prometheus at the threshold of heaven and earth, Hughes contemplated ‘the body of Prometheus as the body of humanity, and his wounds as its smoldering cities’ (Sagar, 150); for it was the Modern man, who in his hysterical quest for ‘science’ and innovation, quite similar to Shelley’s scientist, produced the statement of death and butchery, consequently, rooting the cause for the fall of humanity.

Although, the Second World War came to a halt post the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, yet the ambience of the war did not. The Cold War period which lasted till the late twentieth century, until the concrete formulation of the United Nations and related organizations, heightened the political tension at the global level, adding to it the ‘fear’ of losing humanity, only at the brink of power. The eleventh verse in the anthology surmises the state of modern man, endorsed in the shades of Prometheus caught red-handed struggling between the ‘two estates of power’. As Hughes writes,

‘Prometheus on his crag,

Tried to recall his night’s dream-

Where wrists and ankles were anchored, in safe harbor

And two cosmic pythons, the Sea and the Sky,

Fought for the Earth – a single jewel of power,

And the hammer splayed head of the spike through the chest

Was a swallowtail butterfly, just trembling.’ (Moortown, 77)

To the critical eye, it is not the Prometheus whose ‘wrists and ankles were anchored’, who was caught amidst the two supreme powers of the Nature, witnessing the butterfly trembling, but rather the Modern Man, vulnerable and powerless, wrestling between the power struggle of the Supreme ‘rulers’ on earth, primarily the Axis powers and the Allied powers, only to silently observe the interiors of the delicate and benevolent nature in apprehension. It is towards the end of the sequence, in the twentieth verse of the anthology that surmises the self-examination of Prometheus towards his life he had lived, towards the transgression he had committed, towards the vulture who was consuming him. This is the intensity of the mythical Prometheus – casting the shadows of war on the modern man. Observing in the scavenger his ‘unborn half-self’, and seeking for his spiritual rebirth, the Titan God through the versified sequence of his self-evaluation, embarks a probability for the mankind from the vulnerability of their claustrophobic state, suffering from all evils that had been left loose from Pandora’s ‘brimming jar’.

In Prometheus, the critical eye witnesses Hughes adopting a different strategy to resolve the “emotional, spiritual and psychological dilemmas that cannot be solved by a simple insistence on the monolithic stance of invulnerability” (Hirschberg, 134). A similar strategy is evident in the poet’s most significant anthology – *Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) – where Hughes, unlike in his anthology on Prometheus, critiques the modern man in the urban post-war space, but rather critiques the religion modern man is bound to follow, depicting it in a larger scale than that in the *Theology of Wodwo* anthology;

‘Adam ate the apple

Eve ate Adam,

The Serpent ate Eve.

This is the dark intestine. (Theology)

Exploring Hughes' Ideas On Religion Through His Anthropomorphic Crow

Jackson in the research, "Learning to Sing, Learning to Love; Re-reading Ted Hughes's Crow Poems" writes, "These poems centre on a mythological, anthropomorphic bird names Crow, who is both a trickster and a survivor and who is always scavenging for his next meal in a bleak desolate world. Exactly when and where Crow exists is unclear. Sometimes he is with God, Adam, and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and sometimes he travels through the rubble of a post-apocalyptic, fallen civilization devastated by atomic war and disease" (Jackson). It appears quite intriguing that Hughes foreshadows the impending arrival of his Crow much before formulating its anthology; in *Wodwo*, through verses including 'Theology' and 'Reveille', all caricatures of God, Adam, Eve and the Serpent are constructed. Sagar in "*Art of Ted Hughes*" summarizes the mythical boundaries on which the post-modern poet breathes life to his anthropomorphic Crow. Sagar writes, 'God having created the world has a recurring nightmare. A huge hand comes from deep space, takes him by the throat, half-throttles him, drags him through the space, ploughs the earth with him back into heaven in cold sweat. Meanwhile, Man sits at the gates of the heaven waiting for god to grant him audience. He has come to ask God to take life back. The nightmare appears independent of the creation, and God cannot understand it. The nightmare is full of mockery of the creation, especially of the man. God challenges the nightmare to do better. This is just what the nightmare was waiting for. It plunges down into matter and creates Crow" (Sagar, 106).

Though there is a dominant present of Crow in the mythical legends and folkloric narratives of Eskimos, Indo-European, Persian, Japanese and Islamic traditions, yet Hughes predominantly employs the crow as a critique of Modern Christianity. Introducing the Crow with all its blackness in *Two Legends*, Hughes' Crow is observed as an antagonist of God. Keeping into consideration the post war, post modern scenario where questions were raised on truth and identity, the humanist within Hughes too raised suspicion on the 'truth' of the divine powers. It is having witnessed the war-time crisis with the modern man struggling like Prometheus for his spiritual awakening, Hughes challenges the supreme power to which humanity faithfully bows down to.

This is precisely done by Hughes and his Crow in '*Crow's Theology*', where in the initial segment of the poem the creatures realizes it's worth, having comprehended the benevolent temperament of Almighty; however, by the ending segment of the verse, the critical eye approaches the following words;

'Crow realized there were two Gods

One of them much bigger than the other

Loving his enemies

And having all weapons.’ (Crow,29)

At this juncture, one is confirmed of the harshness in Hughes’s commentary on religion, considering the well-sustained notion of the religion as a yet another provisional myth. This theology of Crow, however, undermines as well highlights the presence of two gods – raising a hope amongst the modern men; one God who has created the Man and is benevolent towards Mankind, the one who has ‘permitted’ the crow to exist despite its immoralities, and the other God, who is ‘more powerful’ than the benevolent one, pursuing Man to be violent and brutal, the result of which is war.

In ‘*Crow’s Blacker than Ever*’, the critical eye witnesses the crow tampering down the original myth of creation. Detaching Man and God, from their ‘Manliness’ and ‘Godliness’, where things looked like falling apart, Crow discloses the duality and dichotomy of the self and the binary; of God and his creation; of Masculine and his Feminine; of Body and its Soul, only to grin with the black flag the creature has carried since *Two Legends*. According to what the verse proposes it is the agony inculcated by the Crow that has caused fissures in the associations of Human with the Divine, that becomes the primary root for a war-like situation on Earth; indeed, the contemporary modern man is at a distance from the ‘one true God’.

Hughes’ *Crow*, though as per the analysis of literary scholars and intellectuals, proves to ferment the age-old beliefs of the human civilization in God, yet one cannot deny the anthology being a simpler illustration of cynicism and credence. The critical eye, upon intricately examining the socio-political and cultural context in which the poet was at the pinnacle of his genius, and equating it with Hughes’s concept of ‘shamanism’ will not be hesitant to assert the anthropomorphic Crow, not only as a rival to religious faith, but also as the skeptical power within the Modern Man. Agonized by the traumatic encounters of life and death, this Man appears hanging in between truth and suspicion, incredulity and knowledge ; between Crow and the God, where the scales of the Crow seem to go higher than that of God. A literal scrutinizing of the bird reveals it not only as a mouthpiece of the poet challenging Christianity, but also an open declaration of the penetrating of lust and hatred, into the roots of humanism.

In *Childish Prank*, Hughes parodies the myth of Genesis, where Adam is created from the dust of earth, and Eve is born through his ribs upon a request by Adam to God for a companion; here, in the verse the critical eye witnesses God pondering upon the souls of his creation while they lay ‘inert on the garden of Eden’. However, in his pondering over the infusion of souls, God remained ignorant towards the actions of the Crow, which was successful in instilling the lustful desire in human that torments mankind forever. A farce on the physical intimacy of humankind, is further explicated in *Apple Tragedy*, Hughes deconstructs the original sin and the cultural attitude towards the intimacy of Adam-Eve. Reconstructing the myth of

Genesis where Satan disguised in the form of a serpent tempts Eve to consume the forbidden fruit that results in the tragedy of Mankind, Hughes, inculcates God for the “apple tragedy”. One sees here the image of God as having little accountability on the acts of his creation. What appears intriguing is that Crow’s accuses over God positions him not only as an observer, but also as an active participant in the mythical framework of the Biblical myth. His superiority over God is provocative in the verse – ‘*Crow’s Song for Himself*’.

‘When God hammered Crow

He made Gold

When God roasted Crow in the Sun

He made the diamond

When God buried Crow in the earth

He made Man

When God tried to chop Crow in two

He made the Woman

When God said; ‘You Win, Crow’,

He made the Redeemer.’ (Crow, 68)

Hughes through the verse attempts to prove Crow’s superiority over God. A critical reading of the verse indicates God’s ruminative endeavors to dethrone and obliterate the Crow and the amorality the creature vibrates, yet the cynicism of the crow however, is taken over by the confidence of the Almighty, quite suggestive of the psychological battle at the physical level—the pessimism of war winning over the optimism of humanity.

Similar explications are also internalized by the critical eye while scrutinizing *Crow’s First Lesson* where God fails to indoctrinate to Crow the connotation of ‘love’. The impotency of the anthropomorphic bird highlights Modern Man’s dearth in the post-war world to utter, and feel the simplest emotion of love and affection; rather, the Crow in the process embraces the figures of darkness and filth – ‘*a blue fly, a tsetse, a mosquito*’ (Crow,11) . The critical eye witnesses once again a battle of darkness and hatred imbued in the contemporary attitude bereft of the light and love God and spiritual faith aims to provide the Mankind. The anthology of the Crow, thus where is often studied as a critique on Christianity on the part of the poet, under the new light emerges as a battle of urbanized human bereaved of its brightness and immersed in the darkness of the Crow, with the benevolent God time and again reminding its creations of his abstract form in Nature.

Conclusion

When the entire globe remained apprehensive of the brutal consequences, human action had carved, Ted Hughes alienated himself to the domain of the non-human, detaching from the

human psychology. Conjoining his childhood fancies, the memories of his rural quarters distanced from the ‘superficiality’ of urban life, with the anxieties and agonies of the global wars – the poet conjectured in his genius various shades of Nature and Man. Each anthology embarks a significant ascent of the poet towards spirituality and the truth of existence; moving from the glimpses of savagery, serenity, and suffering of human, to the incantations of his poetic career to rejuvenate his society with fertility and hope, and awakening the ‘real’ identity of self. It is for these contributions that Hughes was designated as the Poet Laureate of Britain in 1984 – he was not a Wordsworth or a Eliot, yet his genius lies in confronting Man with his doings, and contemplate for the space Foucault is demanding for in his extracted words which commenced the discussion.

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