

CROW MYTHOLOGY IN TED HUGHES'S POETRY

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Abstract:

*Ted Hughes is always obsessed with myth. In fact, Hughes's best poetry is highly mythical. His first major preoccupation with myth is evident in the finest poems of *Wodwo* (1967). He published his *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow* in 1970 in response to a request by his friend and American artist, Leonard Baskin, who had at the time produced several pen and ink drawings of crows. Truly, Hughes creates Crow mythology out of these popular Crow poems. Hughes wrote *Crow*, mostly between 1966 and 1969, after having undergone a turbulent period following the death of his wife Sylvia Plath. The book is a collection of about fifty eight poems (in the original edition) about the character Crow. Here Hughes employs a creative mythology, in the sense, his Crow poems are not myths by themselves but they treat mythic themes and material. He borrows these themes from several primitive mythologies, particularly from the Trickster and the Christian mythology. Crow occupies a uniquely important place in Ted Hughes's oeuvre and Hughes himself acknowledges that Crow is his masterpiece. It is a stylistic experiment and an ideological challenge to both Christianity and humanism. In this paper a modest attempt is being made to critically appreciate the best of Crow poems written by Ted Hughes.*

Key Words: *Trickster, apocalypse, folk fables.*

Analysis: *Crow* consists of fragments of surreal, epic and folk fables with Crow as its main protagonist. Commenting on how he got the idea to write poems on Crow Hughes said 'The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that Crow would sing. In other words songs with no music whatsoever, in a super simple and in a super ugly language and this is the basis of the style of whole thing'. (Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p.20). David Lodge in his essay 'Crow and Cartoons', writes that *Crow* imitates the scope of the Bible, covering the history of the world from beginning to end, from Genesis to Apocalypse, and taking it on the way the universal themes: birth, copulation and death; language, art, science: love and war; nature and city (*The Critical Quarterly*, 1971). The following summary compresses the substance of the narrative, the account of Crow's creation Hughes gives at readings:

Having created the world, God has recurring nightmare. A huge hand comes from deep space, takes him by throat, half throttles him, drags him through space, ploughs the earth with him then throws him back to heaven in a cold sweat. God cannot imagine what in his own created universe can have such power over him. And repeated attempts to make the nightmare show itself fail until God finally manages to make it speak. But its voice simply mocks God and his creation, particularly Man, who has completely mismanaged his gifts and destroyed himself and the world. And God does not seem to be able to do anything about it. He becomes engaged and challenges the nightmare to prove what it is saying. In reply, the nightmare simply points to the man in the gates of heaven, who has come to ask God to take life back. The nightmare is jubilant and God mortified. So God challenges the nightmare to do better and this is exactly what the nightmare has been waiting for. It plunges down into matter and creates Crow. God puts Crow through all kinds of ordeals involving

his annihilation, dismemberment or transformation, but Crow survives them all. Meanwhile, he interferes in God's activities, sometimes trying to learn or help, at other times openly opposing God's will. (Interview with Faas, London Magazine, 1971)

Hughes's Crow tells a story about the game in which God and Crow are engaged. The predominant themes that form the sequence, however, for the sake of analytical study can be categorised as: the pseudo Biblical themes that mock Christian concepts, themes related to Oedipal and White Goddess myth, themes displaying apocalyptic horror, explicit violence and disaster, and basic human themes riddled with self consciousness and guilt.

Pseudo-Biblical themes: The Pseudo-Biblical themes of Crow sequence include inversions, parodies and semi burlesque accounts of the Biblical Creations and other Christian concepts. These poems are important in tracing the direction of Hughes's concept of Christianity. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is one of the principle sources of books of Hughes's themes. He often parodies and reverses the familiar pre-Christian concepts like Creation and Logos, biblical God, Christ, Adam, Eve, Crucifixion and the Serpent. These poems suggest Hughes's sense of a soured attitude toward Reformed Christianity's banishment of instinctual energies.

Two Legends- The Birth of Crow

The Crow sequence begins with the concept of creation. 'Two Legends' is an inversion to the account of God's Creation in the Biblical Genesis. The first legend deals with the creation of the 'black' universe while the second legend records the birth of Crow. The poem, in fact, introduces an element of blackness that is prevalent throughout the volume. According to the Bible 'the earth was without form and void and darkness were upon the face of the deep' (Genesis). But Hughes's account of Creation is quite contrary to Biblical belief. In the beginning, there is utter darkness in which everything is black. It is an inner lightless world of lungs, liver, blood, bowels, brain and its loud tunnel of total darkness. The muscles try to pull out into the light, but the soul stammers hugely as it tries to pronounce the sun. From this totally 'black' universe there is born a Crow from a black egg.

A black rainbow
Bent in emptiness
Over emptiness
But flying. ('Two Legends', *Crow*, p.13)

Examination at the Womb Door-Crow's baptism

The poem mocks at Christian baptism. It includes a catechism used in the examination of baptismal applicants to Christianity. Here, Crow is interrogated by death. The interrogation reveals that death is stronger than the composite of life's attributes like feet, face, lungs, muscles, guts & brains; which, merely belong to death. Death owns all things and is stronger than earth, space, hope, will, love and life. Yet Crow is claimed to be stronger than death. Christianity is based on the hope of a Saviour who is stronger than death. Baptism is an affirmation of an eternal life through Christ. The irony of the poem is that death is portrayed as stronger than life. The poem may be read as a confrontation of existence and non-existence on the most elemental level.

Who is stronger than hope? Death
Who is stronger than the will? Death
Stronger than love? Death.
Stronger than life? Death.
But who is stronger than death?
Me, evidently
Pass, Crow. ('Examination at the Womb Door', *Crow*, p.15)

Crow's First Lesson-Crow as embodiment of hate

In 'Crow's First Lesson', Hughes conveys that even the all pervasive, omnipotent God has failed to induce love into the self created world which is full of malice and viciousness. When God tries to teach Crow love, basic to all worlds, Crow produces a world of sharks, blue flies, tsetse, mosquitoes and lust which are the embodiments of hate. The implication of the poem is that God is not competent enough to induce love into the world. Crow's guilt is a reflection of Adam's guilt after the Fall where man hides himself from God.

Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea
 And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth
 "No, No", said God, "Say Love, Now try it. Love"
 Crow gaped, and bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito
 Zoomed out and down
 To their sundry flesh-spots. ('Crow's First Lesson', *Crow*, p.20)

A Childish Prank: Asexual farce

'A Childish Prank' is a brilliant piece of sexual farce, where the serpent, originator of sin and death, becomes a phallic symbol of life. The poem parodies Genesis which says that Adam is created from the earth's dust and has an immortal soul breathed into him. The parody of the poem is that man is induced with a painful sexuality instead of with a soul by Crow. The god has created Adam and Eve and falls asleep while pondering how to give them a purposeful activity. The inference is that infusing a soul into man was so great a problem for the God, which he thought and thought and finally went to sleep. Now, the mischievous Crow bit God's only son, worm into two and stuffed the tail end to the man and the head half into the woman. Where the head half longs its tail half to join it. Thus, Crow maliciously instils man with animal lust that torments him forever.

He stuffed the head half head first into woman
 And it crept in deeper and up
 To peer out through her eyes
 Calling its tail half to join up quickly, quickly
 Because O it was painful. ('A Childish Prank' *Crow*, p.19)

A Horrible Religious Error-Crow commits archetypal religious error

In this poem, Crow commits an archetypal religious error by eating the serpent. Hughes describes the serpent as 'the sphinx of the final fact'. The serpent promises man both immortal life and God like awareness while seducing Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. This promise is conveyed by the serpent's 'double flicker tongue'. Just like the sphinx, the serpent also perplexes human reason with its alibis, deceits and riddles. Man and woman collapses yielding to the serpent's whisper 'your will is our peace'. Crow, who has been watching the drama, peers at and then grabs it and eats it. Crow thinks that he has saved man and woman by eating the serpent, but he does not know that he has swallowed much bigger creation itself, as in the archetypal religious error, the slaughter of Tiamat by the upstart God Marduk.

Grabbed this creature by the slack skin nape,
 Beat the hell out of it and ate it. ('A Horrible Religious Error', *Crow*, p.45)

Apple Tragedy-Reversal of the Biblical Fall

In 'Apple Tragedy', God, not the serpent, is shown as corruptor of the world. The imagery of the poem reverses the Fall in the Garden of Eden. 'I am well pleased' is an obvious reversal of God's approval of the Biblical creation. The serpent is seen as the Creator and God as the tempter. Eden becomes an image not of the ideal Paradise of Eden but is transformed into a scene of irreconcilable discord between man and woman and man and God. Adam smashes the snake with a chair.

But God said: 'you see this apple?'
 I squeeze it and look cider.

The serpent had a good drink
 And curled up in a question mark.
 Adam drank and said: 'Be my God'
 Eve drank and opened her legs. ('Apple Tragedy', *Crow*, p.78)

Crow Blacker than Ever- Travesty on Christian redemption

The poem is a parody on Christian redemption. The Bible says that God promises his redemption through his son. But Hughes makes a travesty of the theme. Crow intervenes to attempt the serious task of resurrection. He tries to take the role of Christ as the instigator of resurrection; however, his attempt of resurrection is doomed to be a failure and what he could create is horror that is beyond redemption. His attempt misfires and becomes disastrous. The joint at the reintegration gives way to gangrene and it begins to stink.

When god disgusted with man
 Turned towards heaven
 And man disgusted with god
 Turned towards Eve
 Things looked like falling apart
 But crow...crow
 Crow nailed them together
 The heaven and earth creaked at the joint
 Which became gangrenous and stank
 Crow
 Grinned
 Crying "This is my creation." ('Crow Blacker Than Ever', *Crow*, p.69)

Themes relating to Oedipus Myth:

Song for a Phallus-Crow's version of Oedipus

In many Crow poems, Hughes intertwines the theme of alienation of modern man from nature with that of the Oedipus myth. Hughes's mother is essentially the earth Mother & Mother Nature.

The poem is Crow's version of Oedipus. Here Crow pokes fun at the Oedipus myth. Crow deviates from the traditional Sophoclean Oedipal myth: his Oedipus attempts patricide as well as matricide. Crow's song of Oedipus opens with the child Oedipus who is told by the oracle at Delphi that he is destined to slay his father and commit incest with his own mother. In the original myth when Laius, his father abandons the child to die on Mt. Etna the child Oedipus is rescued by the ordeal by a shepherd, who raises the child as the son of Polybus and Merope in Corinth. In Crow's account, his father takes that howling brat, ties his legs and throws him to the cat. But Crow's Oedipus escapes with luck. He does not answer the Sphinx's riddle, instead he kills her. Crow's Oedipus is blinded by ignorance. In order to know the mysteries of after life, he commits matricide by splitting his mother's womb. But what he discovers is his own foetus in her womb.

He split his mammy like a melon
 He was drenched with gore
 He found himself curled up inside
 As if he had never been born
 Mamma Mamma ('Song for a Phallus', *Crow*, p.75-77)

Oedipus Crow-Crow as Oedipus

In 'Oedipus Crow', Crow is symbolically linked with the Oedipus figure. Here, Crow attempts to get rid of the inescapable influence of his mother. In doing so, he rejects the forces which guide his life, as soon as he perceives them to be threatening his freedom. But to escape from these forces is to mutilate him. Thus, having rejected and consequently been rejected by the sources of life and continuity, Crow has led himself to this inevitable destruction. At the end of the poem, one finds Crow only barely alive.

One legged, gutless and brainless, the rag of himself-
 So death tripped him easy
 And held him up with a laugh, only just alive and his watch galloped away in a cloud of
 corpse-dust
 Crow dangled from his one claw corrected.
 A warning. ('Oedipus Crow', *Crow*, p.43)

Themes portraying violence and apocalypse:

Crow's Account of Battle-Crow's prophecy

Many poems in Crow sequence are violent and apocalyptic. These poems display horror and violence. Crow suffers violence at the hands of some metaphysical entity or tells some apocalyptic story. Both 'Crow's Account of Battle' and 'Notes for a Little Play' are the Crow's prophecies of the future disaster of mankind which it cannot escape. In 'Crow's Account of Battle', he testifies to the horrors of wars past, present or the future. Crow attributes this disaster invariably to science and technology.

From sudden trap of calculus,
 Theorems wrenched men in two,
 Shock-severed eyes watched blood squandering as from a drainpipe
 Into the blank between stars. ('Crow's Account of Battle', *Crow*, pp.26-27)

Notes for a Little Play-Crow's account of nuclear holocaust

In this poem, Crow again foretells the total destruction of the world in the face of a nuclear holocaust. The destruction is violent and sudden 'without a goodbye'. The earth is totally destroyed and Crow says that the demolition is total but for two creatures: Mutations and Horrors. They seem to devour each other helplessly and begin to dance a strange nuptial dance because they do not know what else to do. They celebrate their marriage in darkness without guest or God.

Two survivors, moving in the flames blindly.
 Mutations-at home in the nuclear glare.
 Horrors-hairy and slobbery, glossy and raw.
 They sniff towards each other in the emptiness
 They fasten together. They seem to be eating each other. ('Notes for a Little Play', *Crow*, p.86)

The Battle of Osfrontalis: seduction of crow

The poem is a battle between primitivism and sophisticated intellection. Here, words try to seduce Crow. They bribe him, force him to yield to them and finally attempt to seduce him. Words bribe him with life insurance policies, bank cheques and Alladin's wonder lamp. Crow, like Hamlet, feigns madness and refuses them. Then words appeal to his sensuality but still Crow resists. In a final attempt, they threaten him with the glottal bomb, 'infiltrate guerrilla labials' and 'swamp him with consonantal masses' but could not overcome Crow's resistance. Suddenly, the words are frightened and retreat into the skull of a dead jester.

Words came with Life Insurance Policies-
 Crow feigned dead.
 Words came with warrants to conscript him-
 Crow feigned mad.
 Words came with blank cheques-
 He drew Minnie Mice on them.
 Words came with Alladin's lamp-
 He sold it and bought a pie. ('The Battle of Osfrontalis', *Crow*, p.34)

Crow Go-Crow devours Ulysses and Beowulf

In 'Crowe Go', Crow devours Ulysses, strangles Dejanira and drinks Beowulf's blood. When Crow

goes in pursuit of Ulysses, he becomes a worm which is naturally devoured by Crow. Crow, then 'strangled error Dejanira' and gets the best part of the dying Hercules 'the gold melted out of Hercules's ashes'. Crow then proceeds 'poltergeist's out of old ponds' to succeed where Grendel failed in his combat with Beowulf. Thus, Crow's frantic search for these legendary figures suggests the quest for his destination which nevertheless seems to be elusive.

Crow followed Ulysses until he turned
As a worm, which crow ate.
Grappling with Hercules' two puffadders
He strangled in error Dejanira
The gold melted out of Hercules' ashes
Is an electrode in crow's brain
Drinking Beowulf's blood, and wrapped in his hide
Crow communes with poltergeists out of old ponds ('Crowego', Crow, p.)

Themes displaying guilt and consciousness:

Crow Hears Fate Knocks at the Door-Crow inquires

In 'Crow Hears Fate Knock at the Door' Crow inquires a stone, a dead mole and the translucent starry spaces to know the meaning of this universe. Ironically enough, he enquires the things that are dead themselves and so he cannot find the meaning of the universe. He feels helpless, yet he is prophetic.

WAS I WILL MEASURE IT ALL AND OWN IT ALL
AND I WILL BE INSIDE IT
AS INSIDE MY OWN LAUGHTER
AND NOT STARING OUT AT IT THROUGH WALLS
OF MY EYE'S COLD QUARANTINE
FROM A BURIED CELL OF BLOODY BLACKNESS
This prophecy was inside him, like a steel spring
Slowly rending the vital fibres. ('Crow Hears Fate Knock at the Door, Crow, p.23)

Crow Tyrannosaurus-Crow's guilt

'Crow Tyrannosaurus' is one of Hughes's most powerful of Crow poems. The poem exposes the themes of guilt, suffering and pain. Tyrannosaurus Rex was the most destructive eater ever to live on the earth. In this poem, Crow realises that life is a cortege mourning and lament. Swifts pulsate with the anguish of the insects they have eaten. A cat sorrows over its killings, though it is deaf to its victim's suffering. But with man it is quite different. He can neither feel nor hear his victim's sorrows. In fact, he is a walking Abattoir of innocents, whose brain incinerates their outcry. Crow can rationalize away his killings, as man usually does. He cannot prevent himself preying on animals. But, he has to kill if he wants to survive. Although it is beyond Crow's power to stop eating, for a moment at least, he becomes fully conscious of the suffering of his victims. Crow truly discovers the laws by which he must live; his need to live by eating is stronger than his desire to avoid killing. Therefore, he kills and weeps until the agonies of his victims blind his eyes and deafen his ears.

Grubs grubs he stabbed
Weeping
Weeping
Weeping he walked and stabbed
Thus came the eye's
Roundness
The ear's
Deafness ('Crow Tyrannosaurus', Crow, pp.24-25)

The Black Beast-Crow in search of Black Beast

In this poem, Crow looks for the black beast everywhere but in him. He is in search of the beast, sits in its chair telling lies about it. In search of the black beast, Crow destroys everything he wanted to save himself from it and looks everywhere for it but within himself.

Crow shouted after midnight, pounding the wall with a blast

Where is the black beast?

Crow split his enemy's skull to the pineal gland

Where is the black beast?

Crow crucified a frog under a microscope; he peered into the brain of a dog fish

Where is the black beast?

Crow roasted the earth to a clinker, he charged into space

Where is the black beast?

Crow flailed immensely through the vacuum, he screeched after the disappearing stars

Where is it? Where is the black beast? ('The Black Beast', *Crow*, p.119)

Crow Nerve Fails-Sin of existing

'Crow Nerve Fails' is a continuation to 'Crow Tyrannosaurus'. Here, Crow feels guilty because of what Sartre calls 'the sin of existing'. He is burdened with guilt not because of his being conscious of killing, but with the fact of physical existing. Crow has committed so many crimes that he feels he is the archive of his victim's accusations. He is the unforgivable prisoner of his victims. He finds his every feather the fossil of a murder. His body is visibly covered such black feathers that represent his crimes. These feathers imprison him in the black garb of his prisoner 'clothed in his conviction/Trying to remember his crimes'. They form so integral a part of his body that he cannot exist without them. So Crow quickly flies off as his feathers constantly reminded him of his crimes.

His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction.

Trying to remember his crimes

Heavily he flies. ('Crow Nerve Fails', *Crow*, p.47)

Crow on the Beach-Existential suffering

'Crow on the Beach' is one of the finest poems in Crow that highlights Crow's loneliness. Here, Crow is seen watching the actions of the sea, 'the sea's ogreish outcry and convulsion'. The sea is symbolically equated with the existential suffering that is beyond man's knowledge. Crow could grasp the absolute indifference of the universe to his existence but the real meaning to life, unfortunately, still remains a mystery to him.

he knew he grasped

Something fleeting

Of the sea's ogreish outcry and convulsion

He knew he was the wrong listener unwanted

To understand or help-

His utmost gaping of brain in his tiny skull

Was just enough to wonder, about the sea,

What could be hurting so much? ('Crow on the Beach', *Crow*, p.40)

Dawn's Rose-crow's desolation

This is an exquisite poem which captures the mood of Crow who is caught trapped in between moods of desolation and loneliness. The poem stands apart from other Crow poems in every sense. In fact, the poem is, in the words of Keith Sagar, 'a distillation of the spirit of Crow' (*The Art of Ted Hughes*, p.103). Here, Crow's puckered and agonising cry is compared to an old woman's death rattle, a new born baby's grieving on its contact with cold steel, and finally to gunshot, that would wound Crow. The poem balances the new imagery of new life with the grief of old age, parting and death.

Desolate is the Crow's puckered cry
 As an old woman's mouth
 When the eyelids have finished
 And the hills continue. ('Dawn's Rose', *Crow*, p.59)

King of Carrion-Crow suffers from nothingness

The poem depicts Crow as a king of desolation, emptiness, dereliction and nothingness. Here, Crow is depicted as a ruler and he rules over a world in which life and death are indistinguishable. His kingdom is the palace of skulls and his throne is 'the scuffold of bones, the hanged things'. He is the absolute monarch of the desolation that men now have it in them to create on earth. The world over Crow reigns, now, is a barren, bleak world, a prison from which there is no escape for him at all. It is a world where no man would go and no crow would fly. He is shrunk, silent, immobile and has become death's very totem.

His kingdom is empty
 The empty world, from which the last cry
 Flapped hugely, hopelessly away
 Into the blindness and dumbness and deafness of the gulf
 Returning, shrunk, silent
 To reign over silence. ('King of Carrion', *Crow*, p.91)

Little Blood-Crow's search for truth

'Little Blood' is the concluding poem of Crow sequence. It is the poet's prayer to little blood to help him in understanding the underside of things, which are blacker for his ability to see one 'wounded by stars and leaking shadow'. He wishes to see the inside of mountains, to sing of the spaces between stars. He believes that little blood has grown wise and terrible through feeding on death. It is the sacred beast of prophecy, a strange boneless, skinless little carcass 'grown so wise grown so terrible'. The little blood has thus:

Grown so wise grown so terrible
 Sucking death's mouldy tits.
 Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O Little Blood. ('Little Blood', *Crow*, p.94)

The theme of the Trickster Mythology:

Ted Hughes's description of Crow and his function have a clear affinity with Paul Radin's understanding of the Trickster Wakdjunkaga in the Winnebago story cycle. Both Crow and the Trickster figure the shadow side of the psyche, epitomizing those 'black' elements which are judged negative or inferior, and therefore repressed by the Ego-personality. A typical Trickster figure as in Western Indian mythologies is greedy, over sexed, selfish, covetous, aggressively mischievous, and capable of wiliness and cleverness. In short, he is a creature all too human in all imperfections.

Hughes's Crow clearly follows the pattern set by the Trickster cycle. Like the typical Trickster he amuses himself playing pranks on Biblical God, Adam and Eve. He observes, explores and deals with the world with a callous blend of both violence and detachment. He aspires to become God like, and attempts to create things; but of course, he is doomed to fail and fall because of his miscreations. Although blasted to nothing by truth and hammered, beaten and roasted by God, Crow is regenerated through violence and appears indestructible.

Through Crow as Trickster one may learn the development of the soul. *Crow* is a series of suffering and spiritual adventure. He passes through initiations, encounters monsters and is instructed in hidden mysteries. However, he undergoes a radical transformation in this book; he begins as an avowed meddler whom his opponent God has created to 'show Him up' in the creation, and gradually he becomes less and less adversary of Man; and more and more a humanly vulnerable creature himself, sharing helplessly in the human predicament. Crow begins as, in Jarold Ramsey's words, akin to devil, he becomes a Trickster

Transformer whose tricks are nasty for man; later he is identified with Prometheus and other heroes; later he is linked with Christ, ultimately he assumes merely human status'. (The Achievement of Ted Hughes, p.178).

Conclusion: Though *Crow* sequence, as Stan Smith points out, Ted Hughes portrays negative qualities such as dark animosities, hatred, violence, lust & pessimism, there are a number of poems that assert a fundamental humanity (*Contemporary Poets*, p.419). It is also true that in some of the most important poems Crow's learning leads to the discovery of human values. It is also significant that many of Crow poems reveal the necessity for a basic humanity that is capable of humility, compassion, outrage, guilt and the onus of responsibility in order to survive. Hughes also hints at transcendence. The entire volume of *Crow* concerns itself in its discovery of the need for the experience of basic human values, in its suggestion that the self may only find connection with the universe by the 'losing of self importance'.

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