



Thematic Concerns in Ted Hughes' Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes writes frequently of animal life, of nature, the elemental force of non-human life and the inner turbulence of modern man who is seen as a cut off from the instinctual sources of his power. His themes express the powerful, often violent energies and the divided nature of modern man. The present paper is an attempt to critically analyse the major themes discussed in the poetic oeuvre of Ted Hughes.

KEYWORDS: Ted Hughes, Man, Nature, Animals, Death

Introduction

Ted Hughes has emerged as a major English poet during the last thirty years. He is profoundly concerned with the question of human existence, man's relation with the universe, with the natural world and with his own inner self. He is awfully serious about the problem of human consciousness. In this regard Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts' observation is worth quoting:

Ted Hughes' endeavour is to gain access to, and give expression to, a level, of being at which the continuity between the processes of Nature experienced within and observed without is unimpeded by consciousness. Individual consciousness, insisting all the time on its separateness, is the cause of painful and destructive alienation from this inner life – the obscure unhappiness of modern man. (Gifford and Roberts 135)

Major Themes in Ted Hughes' Poetry

Underneath his treatment of animals and men, Ted Hughes actually see the most clear manifestation of a life force that is distinctively non-human or rather is non-rational in its source of power. Hughes notices in modern man a sort of reluctance to acknowledge the deepest, instinctual sources of energy in his own being, energy that is related to the "elemental power circuit of the universe", and to which animals are closer than man. That is why the human crowd stands mesmerized at the Jaguar even if it is caged, what mesmerizes the crowd is instinctual sense of power and freedom which man seems to have lost.

This obviates the fact that Hughes' concern with the animals has always been wider and deeper than the simplistic view of him as an 'animal poet'. He is deeply concerned in exploring the primal energies of the animal and natural world that stressed the absolute otherness of the world. He has moved on to express a sense of sterility and nihilism in modern man's response to life, a response which is predominantly motivated by man's rational objective intellect at the expense of the life of emotions and imagination.

Hughes' interest in animals is quite central to his poetic vision, as these beasts, the crow, the jaguar, the tomcat, the skylark, the hawk, the thrushes, the horses, and the pike, all are so close to and so much a part of nature, whereas man has removed himself so far away from it. Nature that once belonged to man now lies deep-buried in the human consciousness. Man, as a result of the dominance of reason and consciousness, stands withdrawn from the situation and is at loss to comprehend how the horses, the animals stand, "grey as the grey environment."

Hughes seems to be suggesting that in modern man it has become a serious weakness because he has allowed too large a gap to develop between his consciousness and his instinctual reaction to his condition. He has cultivated his rational, cognitive powers too exclusively, neglecting his own inner world of feelings, imagination and instinct, and has, therefore divided his own nature, cutting himself off from the natural energies of the universe.

Hughes' treatment of animals is different; it's unique. It is highly poetical, symbolic and significant. His descriptions of animals contain numerous metaphors; and these metaphors relate a particular animal

to all the other creatures and also to human experiences and human concepts. Thus, a thrush is a metaphor of single-minded efficiency which human beings lack. A horse is a symbol of total adaptation to its environment. A pike, a hawk, a jaguar, all are their precise functions, their pure instinct. They are an indirect comment on the several contradictions and deflections that human beings are riddled with.

Hughes' close intimacy with and interest in animals and beasts that inform his poetry is embodied in his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. The title poem of the first collection itself announces the major themes: man in relation to the animals, the earth, in fact the whole nature. In "Hawk Roosting" Hughes establishes himself as a great poet of the world of animals. The poem depicts a bird's eye view of the universe. The hawk believes that the trees, the sun, and the earth have been created for his convenience; that the purpose of creation was solely to produce him; that the world revolves at his bidding; and that all other creatures exist only as his prey. This egotistical hawk says:

It took the whole creation
To produce my foot, my each feather
Now I hold creation in my foot...

Thus the poem reveals to us the hawk's own peculiar point of view and his peculiar consciousness. However, at a deeper level, the hawk becomes the mouthpiece of Nature itself. The beauty of the poem also lies in the precise diction, and exact images. Several other poems of Hughes also establish a similar connection between man, animals and Nature. "The Horses" is connected with the poet-perceiver's view of the patience and endurance of animals to their harsh surroundings. They all endure. The poet fails to do so, though he wishes he could.

Ted Hughes does not merely describe animals or portrays them so exactly; animals are actually his poetic inspiration. This theme is realized so well in "The Thought Fox". In this poem, the fox that the poet-perceiver visualizes is a symbol of the poetic inspiration which intrudes into the mind of the poet and causes the poem to be written. Before the fox is thought, his mind is a 'tabula rasa', where nothing is conceived and born. The visualization, at first faint one, causes the concept of a thought, a sensation. Gradually it takes possession of the poet so much so that the "Page is Printed" – a poem is born. Symbolically, the movement of the thought pervades and finally originates the composition of a poem, not only one poem, but all poems in general. It is a poem about the poetic inspiration and poetic process:

Across the clearings, an eye
A widening, deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business
Till with a sudden sharp hot sink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks
The page is printed.

"The Jaguar" turns our attention to another quality of animals' vis-à-vis man. This poem, as Gifford and Roberts have noted, "is not a poem of just observation but of longing and affirmation, particularly in its final

lines which broaden out to suggest a human possibility." (Gifford and Roberts 156)

As against the instinctual ferocity of the jaguar, all other animals in the zoo, in their lethargy, look like painted beasts on a calendar on the wall of nursery. But the jaguar, even if caged, mesmerizes the crowd with its unfettered sense of freedom and strength. There is no cage to him more than a cell to a visionary. The jaguar seems to laugh at man and tell him that "four walls do not a prison make." The mesmerized crowd unconsciously has discovered in the jaguar his own true, instinctive self, which it has drowned in its intellect:

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wilderness of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

"The Thrushes" is also an example of Hughes' assertion that it is a human tendency to associate ideas with animals of which they may not be aware. The poem contrasts so well the single-minded efficiency of thrushes by which they survive and the deflection, broken consciousness that characterizes human existence.

Death and war are other important themes in the poetry of Ted Hughes. In fact, war, that brings man in the face of death, was an obsession with Hughes. World War I had been one of the powerful influences on the young mind of the poet. Hughes' father had been to the war and he shared his physical suffering and mental horror with his children. This indeed left an indelible impression on the young and sensitive mind of the poet. Later, when World War II and wholesale massacre of Jews by the Nazis caused a great havoc, the young poet's mind revolted against the man-made violence resulting into horrible calamity.

Hughes, despite the charge of violence against him, emerges as a champion of pacifism in his poems written against the horrors of war. Hughes does not close his eyes to the horrible reality and describes the war's ravages in a highly realistic manner. In "Bayonet Charge", "Grief for Dead Soldiers", "Out", and "Six Young Men" he shows the havoc that war causes. In "The Grief for Dead Soldiers", in particular, he presents the picture of a war widow against the building of a memorial to the martyr in the war:

Still she will carry cups from table to sink.
She cannot build her sorrow into a monument
And walk away from it. Closer than thinking
The dead man hangs around her neck, but never
Close enough to be touched or tanked even,
For being all that remains in a world smashed.

The poem "Six Young Men" describes the premature deaths of half a dozen young men who had joined the army in war time. They had once got themselves photographed. This group of photograph, which figures prominently in the poem, is the motivating force behind the poem. But six months after this photograph had been taken, all the six were dead. They had all died in course of the war. These men have been dead for the last forty years, and yet so the poet writes:

And still that valley has not changed its sound
Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

To Ted Hughes' hurt psyche, these young men seem to be more and more real than those who are actually alive.

Another noteworthy poem dealing with death is "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar". This poem is about a protestant clergyman who was

burned to death by fanatical Roman Catholics. Hughes regards this death by burning as the "finest hour" of the man who lost his life on account of the religious bigotry of his opponents. In the eyes of the town's people who witnessed death by burning, Bishop Farrar's fortitude while burning had a greater significance than all the sermons which he had delivered. The bishop is a hero in Hughes' eyes also, and so we have the following beautiful and uplifting lines at the end:

... Out of his eyes,
Out of his mouth, fire like a glory broke
And smoke burned his sermons into the skies.

These poems about death shows Hughes' unconventional attitude to the subject. He discusses death, either of a human being or of an animal (as in "The Pig") without any sentimentality and pathos. And there is a reason to account for that. His poetry acknowledges death as it must acknowledge life.

Ted Hughes chooses to give a different turn to the theme of war and death in "Bayonet Charges." In this poem, the poet expresses the idea that in war, in the face of death, man recovers his animal instinct for survival. There is no deflection; there is no delay; there is no thinking. There is an instinctive action: "Suddenly he awoke and was running." War makes man live in the shadow of death where there is room only for essentials, not trivialities. The soldier's mind is so wonderfully concentrated on the fact of staying alive that he has no time for man-made abstract concepts that insult the reality they seek to contain. He is his instinct:

King honour, human dignity etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue crackling air
His terror's touchy dynamite.

The reality of death is only apprehended by those it affects as a particular, unique, precise physical fact. This point is also evident in "Grief for Dead Soldiers."

Ted Hughes' dominant concern with animals, their natural instinct, and instinctual energy in general goes to the extent of obsession. Both critics and readers have looked upon him as a poet of Nature in the tradition of Romantics. However, his attitude and treatment of Nature is entirely different from others. His distinctiveness distinguishes him from all other poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelly, Blake and Tennyson.

Ted Hughes, unlike Wordsworth (who found Nature a "nurse, guide and guardian") and Tennyson (who found Nature "red in tooth and claw") but like Shakespeare and Robert Graves, considers Nature an ambivalent force. That is why he looks at it with varying attitudes. Though he is sharply aware of the tranquil aspect of Nature, he dwells chiefly on her wild, fierce, tameless and violent aspect. In "October Dawn," the month of October is "marigold", and the cold is so intense that it seems to the poet as if "the ice-age had begun." In "Wind," the ferocity of the wind is a terror both to man and nature. It tramples the corn field like a stampede and shakes the hills out of their places. The ramshackle house of the poet trembled like the falling of a tumbler. The poet himself shudders and crouches into his house with nothing conscious of except the threatening-wind.

Conclusion

This brief discussion of the various poems reveals that Ted Hughes is primarily concerned with the material reality that governs larger questions of life and death, Nature and the animal world, and above all the inner world of man.

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