



Use of Myths in Ted Hughes's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Myth is related to a community's cultural heritage. Ted Hughes (1930-1998) made use of myth and folklore as a remedy to the corruption and fragmentation of modern civilization. He used some archetypal myths and also created some personal myths. His early poems like "An Otter", "Pike" celebrate the violence and vitality of the animal world. Shamanism becomes a dominant feature in Hughes's poetry. In 1970-72 he wrote a series of Crow poems where the Crow is presented as a Trickster. In these poems, he deconstructs Christian Creation myth and reconstructs his personal myth. Hughes's recourse to myth and symbolism had helped him to go beyond the external features of animals and natural objects and to reveal their deeper symbolic connotations.

Keywords : myth, symbol, shamanism, trickster

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Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was primarily concerned with the creation of an alternative myth of Creation and he was given to the celebration of life force through violence and power. His sensibility was primarily pagan, unlike the refined sensibility of his fellow Movement poet, Philip Larkin. Hughes thought that modern education destroys the imaginative faculty and thus threatens the creative process. As an antidote to this disease of modern civilization, Hughes suggested that the proper education of the future generation lies in the traditional myths and folktales. Regarding his use of myth, P. R. King in *Nine Contemporary Poets* comments:

Hughes works within the tradition of the poet as inspired visionary or shaman (a poet whose function is to employ language to conjure up the gods that control our being). His imagination reaches out and into his subjects to recreate their presence from within and his rational intellect is kept subservient to the supra-rational powers of image, symbol and myth. (p. 108)

While tracing the career of Ted Hughes as a myth-maker, two things in his early life should be mentioned. First, the Yorkshire landscape of his childhood which remained the inspirational force throughout his poetic career. His wanderings in the Yorkshire moor stimulated his interest in animals which would become totems in his poems. Second, his decision to change his course of study from English to Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge in 1953. At this time, he was deeply influenced by the East European poets—Janos Pilinszky and Vasko Popa, James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* and the Celtic and North American Indian folklore.

It is very difficult to define 'myth' in a single bottom-line proposition. It is a term of complex history and meaning. It is related to a community's cultural heritage—its social customs and observances. William G. Doty defines myth in *Myth: A Handbook*:

Myth is a term with no singular historical usage; rather, it has carried and does carry a wide range of defining features, although individual writers tend to

stress features most amenable to their own philosophical view of language, history, the human imagination, and presumed correlations with ritual. (p.12)

Broadly, myth can be subdivided into three categories—archetypal, national and personal myths. Ted Hughes not only appropriated archetypal myths in his poems but also created some personal myths. He enhanced his knowledge in anthropological studies by reading the mystic philosophies of W. B. Yeats and Robert Graves in addition to the psychological studies of Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade's work on comparative religion.

Hughes took resort to myth because he thought that 'mythic imagination' works as the healing power in the face of violence and brutality of the post-Holocaust period. In this context, Rand Brandes writes in his essay "The anthropologist's uses of myth"

Hughes, as mythic poet, wrote to liberate and to heal—the soul, the body, the mind, the community and the world. It would be the shaman and his mythic quest that served as the primary paradigm and sacred script for the poet as healer and liberator. (qtd. in Gifford p. 68)

Ted Hughes's continuing absorption with and transformation of the psychological, moral, social and religious symbolism derived from ancient mythologies tries to re-explore the past tradition and critique the fragmented, uprooted contemporary culture.

Hughes's early collections focus on the vehement energy of predatory animals and man's effort to bring order out of chaos. The roosting hawk, the stabbing thrush, the prowling wolf in *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960) symbolize the elemental vitality. Shamanism, a practice which allows for communication with the spiritual world to resolve the crises of practical life, becomes a dominant feature in the earlier volumes. In his famous poem "An Otter" (from the *Lupercal* volume) he makes use of myth and folklores of the Ojibwa Indians. According to their myth, the messenger of the great, all-seeing spirit foreseeing the miserable fate of human kind makes the otter immortal and empowers it to act as a healing agent. Hughes's description of the otter—"neither fish nor

beast", "of neither water nor land"—focuses on the creature's double existence and mystic nature. Stuart Hirschberg in his seminal book *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes* explains the role of otter in Ted Hughes's poetry:

While the otter, for Hughes, is a symbol of the soul in hiding, the deep soul, his split existence makes him particularly suitable as a projection, in the form of a totem animal, of the shaman's habitual mental state of being conditioned to allow his soul and body free movement in different realms. In modern terms, the shaman clearly has a psychotherapeutic function. (p. 17)

"Pike", another poem from the *Lupercal*, is also steeped in myth. Hughes's description of the pike—"killers from the egg", "of submarine delicacy and horror"—highlights the creature's violent nature. The speaker of the poem kept three pikes in a glass jar, but suddenly there were two and finally one. This confirms their cannibalistic nature—"And indeed they spare nobody." The pike becomes the symbol of the Devil. Stuart Hirschberg thinks that while composing this poem, Hughes was influenced by the idea expressed by Angelo de Gubernatis in his book *Zoological Mythology*. De Gubernatis relates the story of the pike with a myth in the *Mahabharatam*, the great Indian epic. The story goes like this: Manus receives a little fish in a vase of water in which he performs his ablutions. The fish grows so large in one night that the vase could no longer hold it. And Manus, finally recognizing Lord Vishnu in the fish, releases it into the sea. Hughes, in turn, emphasizes the creature's killer instinct and makes it a symbol of the malevolent universe.

"Otter" and "Pike" are examples of Hughes's appropriation of archetypal myths in his poetry. But from the very beginning of his poetic career, Hughes was trying to create some personal myths. This attempt can be seen in his frequently anthologized poem "The Thought-Fox" (from *The Hawk in the Rain* volume). There is an interesting incident behind Hughes's composition of this poem. In his book *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes tells that he was always frustrated in his attempt to keep alive his pet fox-cubs. Twice a farmer killed his cubs and once a poultry-keeper set his dog on his cub. These incidents left a deep mark in his mind. Long after these events, one snowy evening he was sitting in his London lodgings. His brain was vacant, being devoid of poetic ideas. Suddenly, at an epiphanic moment, he imagined a fox entering into the loneliness of a forest. The 'fox' is not an ordinary fox. Actually it is a poem, as P. R. King observes, "about the mind's creation of an imaginary fox which is also used to symbolize the creative faculty of the artist" (p. 116). Imagining the fox in the dark is to wait anxiously in loneliness for the poem to be born. "Thought-fox" is a creative force—a regenerative faculty that results in poetic creation. In the final stanza of the poem, the fox and the creative writer are joined:

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed. (ll.21-24)

Thus Hughes succeeds in his attempt to capture the 'fox' in his poetry. Susan Bassnett in her book *Ted Hughes* rightly points out:

The fox for Hughes is his totemic animal, and just as creators and shamans in primitive societies dress in the skins of totemic animals, so he equates his ability to create poetry with an almost mystical union with a fox. (p. 15)

The "thought-fox" is Hughes's creation of personal myth on the art of writing poetry.

During 1970-72 Hughes began to write his series of *Crow* poems which was finally revised and published as *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1972). In this volume he creates a new kind of myth. Hughes's sculptor-friend Leonard Baskin's suggestion along with his interest in the supernatural, mythology and anthropology led to the creation of the mythic *Crow*. In the *Crow* poems, he deconstructs Christian Creation myth and reconstructs his personal myth. The *Crow* story focuses on Hughes's use of the Quest as a theme and as a pattern for his own poetic development.

Hughes was influenced by the figure of Raven as Trickster in the myths of the North American Indians while creating *Crow*. The mythic story goes like this: after the creation of the world, God has a Nightmare in the form of a Voice and a Hand which mocks God's creation. God challenges the Nightmare to do better and in response to that the Nightmare creates the *Crow*. In Hughes's *Crow* myth, the crow acts as a scavenger and often his songs become the mocking versions of well-known myths.

Two frequently anthologized poems from Hughes's *Crow* series are "Theology" and "A Childish Prank". In "Theology", Hughes subverts the Christian theology and erects his own. He views the serpent (Satan in the Christian theology) as omnipotent. He swallows Eve who has already swallowed Adam who in turn had swallowed the apple. The serpent becomes dominant and God in turn has become the omnipotent ruler who has lost his command and is reduced to a hollow laughing-stock. In "A Childish Prank", Hughes presents, "Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls" in the Garden of Eden and "God pondered". *Crow* plays a trick on God who is presented as incompetent, since the problem of infusing soul was so great that "it dragged him asleep". Hughes's intention behind his attempt to alternative mythology is to revitalize civilization. He emphasizes harmonious development of nature and culture.

Ted Hughes's recourse to myth and symbolism had helped him to go beyond the external features of animals and natural objects and to reveal their deeper symbolic connotations. He had internalized the primitivist worldview and his spontaneity in creating and appropriating myths, deserves praise. By using myths in his poetry, Hughes had often mocked Western culture and helped the incompetent, indecisive readers to confront the vitality of the animal world.

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