

Ideological Overtones and Subjective Anxieties of Ted Hughes : A Critical Perspective On *Crow* (1970)

Abstract

In *Crow* (1970) poems, the early phase of Ted Hughes is revealed with its subjective moods and ideological overtones. This sequence of poems introduces several new poetic strategies in the realm of English poetry in the Post-Second world War era. The crow is the structural myth in it but in Ted Hughes's poetic collection it does not occur all of a sudden. The general background of folklore and myths helps the construction of this emblem of darkness and bad omen. However, its central role in Ted Hughes's poetry is also related with the complex ideological functioning of animal imagery in his first three collections. The poetic consciousness using it mainly intends to unsettle the rigid location and place of rationality in modern human order. But the crow is not a static or consistent figure. The poems in it derive their ideological intensity and aggression through the subversive potential of the conventional image of crow. Deploying it in remarkably distinct and varied contexts, Ted Hughes achieves an ideological conversion of his subjective anxieties complicated by the tragic suicide of Sylvia Plath. This paper is an attempt to decode the unspecified reversals, complexities, contingencies and problematic traits of the crow-image. For the non-Western readers, *Crow* poems offer an internal richness and diversity of contexts usually unanticipated in poetic constructions.

Keywords: Subjective, Ideology, myth, modern, subversive

Introduction

The poetic journey of Ted Hughes is characterized by definite interest in myths, folk tales and other mediums of expression forming popular culture in contemporary world. His poetry experiments with these available tools of style and worldview at a regular level. The use of crow as a major base for symbolism in *Crow* (1970) is a landmark in British poetry in the Post-scenod World War period. It mainly emanates from Crow as symbol and character in folklore and myths. Known as a symbol of darkness and also a bird of bad omen, Crow is not a stranger in popular mind of England. Even in other cultures, whether Western or Eastern, the symbolic meanings of this bird are broadly similar. The emergence of Crow in Ted Hughes's poetry as a highly ambitious image, at one level, relates to the complex function of animal imagery in his first three collections. Giving an account of the compulsions behind the choice of crow, Ted Hughes says, "You see, I throw out the eagles and choose the crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a crow would sing".¹ This statement on the utility of crow as a symbol or myth is significant. Popularly received adverse meanings and connotations of the conventional crow image help its use here. Ted Hughes is primarily using it to unsettle the positives of beauty or sensuous richness, especially the established aesthetic conditioning of readers in late twentieth century. Doing this, the poet is also targeting alternatives of goodness or gentleness. The image of the crow gives him a scope to replace them all with the polar opposites of these categories. The centrality of Crow in the poems is unavoidable, as it is main source of all churning including poetic observations. But it is crow not a static, consistent and easily undersatndable character. The poetic intensity of the majority of *Crow* poems owes mainly to the mythical potential of the crow image. It also emanates from the poet's deployment of it in constantly varied and novel contexts – varying from mythical, biblical to historical contexts of war, violence and the workings of mass media in contemporary culture. David Lodge reveals this placing of crow in multiple situations in a most explicit manner, "the caricatured, quasi-human bird reappearing in a series of heterogeneous but familiar contexts; the mixture of comedy and violence;

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the stark, hard-edged quality of the visual images; the construction of the narrative in a series of parallel episodes, or statement, climaxed by some unexpected twist or deflating payoff line; the sudden transformations, mutations, mutilations, reversal and recoveries, which defy all the laws of logic, physics and good taste.²

In his observation, David Lodge rightly endows unspecified reversals, complexities, contingencies and problematic traits to the crow-image. It also reveals about the possible metaphorical limits. This internal richness is initially unanticipated by the reader while going through these poems. The views of David Lodge are quite close to what another critic Hugh Underhill has to say in this regard when he observes that the crow is used in "an opportunistic way something like Swift's Gulliver for ironically inverting and negating our customary view of things."³

Both the critics agree that the image has element of irony in it – a sort of mischievous character. But they actually mean to say that in the hands of Ted Hughes, this is a novel tool with deep ramifications for his poetic enterprise. Moreover, as a single factor it is immensely important to the poet's style which as Stuart Hirschberg observes, is "at once powerful, colloquial and direct, answers to his purpose of calling into question conventional ways of looking at birth and death, art and science, love and war."⁴ Therefore, a close examination of the crow image as a central poetic strategy and uncovering its symbolic richness. Its underlying changes are crucial to a proper understanding of the poet's purpose to be achieved through *Crow* poems.

Like the subtle variations in the mood and tone of his early poetry, Ted Hughes's *Crow* is also characterized by a persistently aggressive and retaliatory mood in his treatment of the dominant aspects of the modern Western culture. The poet-narrator who in the first three collections constantly remained an involved insider and carried the burrns of the hostile cultural conditions, in this collection of poems has become a distanced commentator. The dichotomy between the civilized and the primitive mode of existence of the 'hot' and 'cold' societies which was so all prevailing in the earlier collections, is largely circumscribed and totally devoid of the romantic and celebrating streak in *Crow*. Moreover, the recurrent tendency to mythologize the theme of Man-Nature relationship generally obscures the underlying arguments of the poet. The ideological antagonism towards science, instrumental rationality and humanism which characterized Ted Hughes's world-view in the first three collections remains unabated in *Crow*. The placing of "Two Legends" and "Lineage" at the beginning of the collection is highly strategic. Apart from creating "an environment, a realm of emptiness"⁵ at the outset of the sequence, the book's basic polarity of darkness and light is also established. Attempted as parodies of the Christian accounts of Genesis, both these poems, as Hugh Underhill observes, show that the poet is "fundamentally at odds with valuing the social and the

historical" and is rather seeking to "wrench its very frame."⁶ The unsettling overtones of "Hawk Roosting" are given an unmistakable ritualistic colouring :

Black is the earth-globe, one inch under,

An egg of blackness

Where sun and moon alternate their weathers

To hatch a crow, a black rainbow. (*Crow*13)

The Crow is the ultimate creation of all the material and elemental energies of the universe. As "Lineage" shows, it comes into being "screaming for Blood/Grubs, crusts/anything"(114). Moreover, it is "stronger than death"(15). The underlying assertions emanating from the violent and immoral capabilities of the crow as an emblem of the marginalized irrational forces are indicative of the unsparing mood of the poet narrator in *Crow* poems. The overemphasis on blackness in both these poems is not merely rhetorical. Instead, that part of the modern human psyche which corresponds to the primitive energies present in human nature but suppressed and distorted beyond recognition by the mono culture of science and industrialization, is being imaginatively re-created. It is being contended that these primitive energies cannot be erased or suppressed since they form an integral part of the whole creation. It is no coincidence that 'light' which in Ted Hughes's symbolism represents the Enlightenment-oriented achievements and commitments of the present day Western culture is absent in both these poems. The apparent absence of all logic and conscious control as exhibited in the surrealist structure of "Two Legends" and "Lineage" is actually not a lawlessness or illogicality but the supreme form of a cognitive science which is qualitatively different from the mode of cognition characteristic of rationalists humanism. A more radical corollary, as David E. Cooper puts in a different context, is that the Western metaphysics is an "historically locatable and misguided substitute for something human beings have lost since pre-Socratic Greece."⁷ The mysticism and religiosity which are integral to the poet's world view as reflected in both these poems are actually not pitted against Christianity, but against the "de-mythologizing effect of science and rationalism... ." ⁸ Essentially, to Ted Hughes, as Clarie Hahn observes, what matters is the "ritualistic rehearsal of the beginning of things, rather than the literary recounting or scientific reconstructing, which holds clues to the meaning of man's present predicament."⁹

Ted Hughes believes that the de-humanization of mankind in the present day Western civilization is caused by a suicidal over-reliance on rationalism and a constant evasion of Nature, both external and internal to man. "Two Legends" and "Lineage" show that Ted Hughes's discontentment with instrumental rationality and humanism is very strong and unmitigable in *Crow*. Throughout the book it is a part of the poet's strategy not to keep the crow a static or consistent character. It is deployed in remarkably different ways in varied contexts. There are a number of poems in which the crow ostensibly "caricatures certain human traits and is involved in parodic versions of familiar human situations."¹⁰

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Among such poems are "Crow's Account of St. George" "The Black Beast", "A Disaster", "Battle of Osfontalis", "Crow Tries Media", "Crow Goes Hunting", "Crow's Fall", "Crow and the Beach", "Crow's Nerve Fails", "Crow Frowns", "Crow's Vanity", "Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door", "Magical Dangers" and "Owl's Song". Through irony and satire, Ted Hughes radically disapproves the dominant attitudes towards science, rationality and the search for objective truth. However, the tone and intensity of subversion varies from poem to poem, ranging from contemptuously playful to devastatingly hard hitting and tensed.

"The Black Beast" and "Crow Improvises" are direct assaults on the rationalistic tendencies of the modern man. The "ferocious virus of abstraction", which according to Ted Hughes, "has bitten so many of us in the nape,"¹¹ is integral to the crow's behaviour in these poems. Unlike the poems in the earlier collections carrying similar ideological overtones, such poems in this collection are alarmingly aggressive in the treatment of the subject. The earlier romantic streak that emanated from the poet's direct or indirect celebration of the primitive mode of existence is not allowed to show up for fear of becoming a mitigating factor which tones down the ferocity of the poet's attack. "The Black Beast" and "Crow Improvises" mark an uncompromising continuation of Ted Hughes's anti science and anti-intellectualist attitude which was exhibited in a milder form in the earlier poems like "Egg-Head" "The Famous-Poet" and "Wings." The critique of instrumental rationality and scientific objectivity also takes the form in these poems of an unsettling mockery of the moral order accompanying them. "Crow Improvises" is about a vitiated and deficient modern consciousness that "took the sun in one hand, a leaf in the other" (64). Moreover,

So he rested a dead vole in one hand
And grasped relativity in the other
The spark that gored through his wordage.
So in one hand he caught a girl's laugh - all
there was of it.
In the other a seven-year honeymoon - all that
he remembered (64)

According to Ted Hughes, the apparent self-confidence and the sense of domination over the surroundings is basically sheer bravado. The 'spark' of rationality and science which over controls his behaviour actually "scours him to ashes" (64). In "The Black Beast" the poet's antagonism towards science and rationality takes the alarming form of savage misanthropy. As in "Crow Improvises", in this poem too, the poet finds nothing worth affirmation in the existential condition of the rationalistic modern man. The very title is degrading. The crow is immediately established as an intellect-governed modern man seeking to identify, understand and correct the dark forces hitherto uncontrolled by him. The occurrence of human attributes in this image of crow reflects the poet's embittered attitude towards the dominant forms of life around him. The crow as a symbol of modern man is stripped of even the minimum human dignity.

Where is the Black Beast?
Crow, like an Owl, swivelled his head.
Where is the Black Beast?
Crow hid in its bed, to ambush it.
Where is the Black Beast?
Crow sat in its chair, telling loud lies against the
Black Beast(28)

Ironically, the crow crucifies "a frog under a microscope", inspects "the brain of a dogfish", reduces the "earth to a clinker" and finally runs "after the disappearing star" (28). But he is unaware that the black beast is essentially located inside him. So, Ted Hughes, on the one hand attacks the rational pursuits searching for an objective reality or truth, on the other contends that the ultimate good or evil resides in the internal world of man. But the anti-humanism which is very strong in both these poems mars the overall poetic effect and raises serious questions in our minds about the meaningfulness of the subversion being accomplished here.

"Crow's fall", "Crow's ego", "Crow's Vanity" and "Crow Sickened" are strategic variations on the themes treated in "Crow Improvises" and "The Black Beast". Having ironic titles, these poems implicitly "deflate the arrogant human constructions of the universe."¹² While retaining the earlier satiric tone, Ted Hughes in these poems implicitly demolishes the prevalent supremacy of science and rationalist humanism. The dichotomy between the rational and natural mode of existence which is central to the structure of these poems, is actually only metaphorically suggested through an implicit reference to certain natural objects in opposition to the crow's rational human tendencies. In "Crow's Fall", the attempts to conquer "sun" end up in a self-defeating posture creating an awkward position for the crow: "He laughed himself to the centre of himself" (36). The over-conscious and rational crow has distanced himself from the elemental energies symbolized by the "sun". "Crow's Vanity" and "Crow Sickened" are more penetrating in the treatment of the subject. Through recurrent use of the phrase "wiped the glass" (44) in "Crow's Vanity", Ted Hughes satirizes the intellectual pretensions of a self-centred modern man: "But it was no good he was breathing too heavy/ And too hot and space was too cold" (44). "Crow Sickened" reveals a harsher reality: "His illness was something could not vomit him up" (74). And further:

Unwinding the world like a ball of wool
Found the last end tied round his own finger (74)

The underlying irony in the structure of the poem sharpens the edge of the poet's attack on the established hegemony of the scientific and rational understanding of the universe. Ted Hughes's central contention in "Crow's Fall", "Crow's Vanity" and "Crow Sickened" is that science and rationalism are dead-ends and are mainly responsible for the perverted development of human history we witness in the Western world in such a glaring form today. Both these foundational components of modernity are depicted as totally devoid of any creativity, and are seen as utterly incapable of expanding the area of

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human knowledge and experience. Ted Hughes's protest against the de-humanizing conditions of the Western society assumes a highly novel and complex character in poems like "Crow Tries Media", "Crow Goes Hunting", "The Battle of Osfrontalis" and "A Disaster". In these poems, the critique of modern Western culture, though in tune with his already established world-view shows marginal increment in his understanding of the complex forms of the dominant reality. The crow in most of these poems represents the ordinary human consciousness in a consumerist culture. Through irony and satire, Ted Hughes questions the established views on language, violence and ideology. Through this questioning in his own style, he appears to challenge the validity of the thinking pattern and the ordinary life-forms that the consumerist culture as a whole fosters.

"Crow Tries Media" and "Crow Goes Hunting" are meaningful variations on the theme of language and self-expression. The radical contention that "defining reality with words is intrinsically doomed to failure,"¹³ is central to both these poems. "Crow Tries the Media" which is primarily an account of the Crow's failure in singing about his beloved from the pure depths of his heart, echoes the poet's own habitual thinking on the subject. He doesn't want any comparisons "with the earth" and to sing 'very-clear' (46). That is why, his distrust in 'words' which he feels have been contaminated by the commercial and consumerist tendencies is quite strong. Over sold like detergents he did not even want words Waving their long tails in public with their prostitutes exclamations (46)

And in "Crow Goes Hunting" a different set of connotations are evoked : Crow Decided to try Words He imagined some words for the job, a lonely pack Clear-eyed, resounding, well trained, With strong teeth. You could not find a better bred lot. (54)

The irony in both these poems work to expose and reveal the radical inadequacy of the consumerist culture as a whole in terms of the sensibility and attitudes it supports and sponsors. The apparent confidence in the words is highly suspect. Unlike the crow in "Crow Tries Media" that like the poet is sceptical about the expressive potential of the present-day language, the bird in "Crow Goes Hunting" is an everyday common man fully conditioned by consumerist culture. He is easily deceived by the glittering appearance of the contemporary Western society, and is taken by its phoney claims of efficiency, clarity, reliability and health. The elements of regimentation and docility stressed by the poet's irony vitiate what positive substance this culture may be supposed to have attained. Both these poems actually focus on the negative impact of commercialism and advertisement on the contemporary human sensibility in general and the means of communication in particular. The language, according to Ted Hughes, that in some remote past used to crystallize human thoughts and feelings in their pure and innocent forms has now gone into the "skull of a dead joster/taking the whole world with them" (34). But Ted Hughes's views on

language need not to be confused with the ideas of certain late twentieth century thinkers on the subject. Their views, as summarized by Terry Eagleton observes, are quite different: "To enter language is to be severed from what Lacan calls the 'real', the inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order."¹³ Rather, in the undercurrents of Ted Hughes's critique of the present-day language, there is an unmistakable romantic longing for some imagined state of existence where language was in touch with "the burning exploratory freshness of mind".¹⁴

References

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