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Birth and Death in Ted Hughes' Poetry

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Abstract:

Birth in Ted Hughes can be studied at two different levels. It is primarily a physical and mundane affair- the coming of the infant into the world of light from the darkness of the womb of the mother. That is, man first appears in this work day reality of life through the womb of the mother as a natural biological process. It is all a matter of blood, shrieks, and cries. In 'Child birth' a poem of Ted Hughes, we are face to face 'with shriek' and heave and spout of blood. Then we see-

A child whimpered upon the bed,
Frowning ten-toad ten- fingered birth

Keywords: Birth, Death, Ted Hughes, poems, heave.

Ted Hughes has written several poems which deal various aspects of death. He observes the idea that death is inevitable; man is mortal and time kills everyone, but art is mortal then time because it is possible only for art to keep even dead people alive. Ted Hughes conveys his idea through the poem entitled 'Six young Men', a death poem. In this poem there were six men who once had their group photographs drawn and who after sometimes met their tragic death one by one. After decades, they still seem to be alive in their photographs. He confirms the claim-

The celluloid of photograph holds them well
Six young men, familiar to their friends,
Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
This photograph has not wrinkled the face or the hands.

Birth

Ted Hughes has observed the process of birth man and animal. There is a poem entitled 'Birth of Rainbow'. It is not just a poem of a seven coloured rainbow in the sky, that indeed it is but it is something more. The poet happens to see a black and white cow standing under the end of a rainbow. He has a different picture and sketches the whole lot in bold, bloody colours in the most realistic scientific way. —

She was licking her gawky black calf
Collapsed wet-fresh from the womb, blinking his eyes,
In the low morning dazzling washed sun.
Black, wet as a collie from a river, as she licked him,
Finding his smells, learning his particularity
A flag of bloody tissue hung from her back-end
Spreading and shining, pink –fleshed and raw, it flapped and coiled
In the unsparing wind.

He goes to the Greek myths and legends and explores the mystery behind the birth of man. He explores the legend of king Oedipus and finds that the birth of the child Oedipus was a mighty mortal affair. In the legend birth of child proves fatal of both of parents. The oracle had predicted the death of the father at the hands of the son; it further prophesied that child would marry the mother. Young Oedipus tried to escape the curse of his birth, but escape he could not. He killed his father, came to the place where his father had ruled and married the queen. The whole legend is presented in the spirit of phallic songs of the Greek comedy.

You stay in there his Daddy cried
Because a Dickybird
Has told the world when you got born
You'll treat me like a turd
Mamma Mamma

Ted Hughes takes up biblical style of presenting lines in his poem 'Lineage.' In the very simple but subjective words Ted Hughes put forth the idea of creation which comes to Never Never, or we may say, just to nothingness. He traces the origin of God to a Scream which brought forth Blood. Then we have eyes followed by fear; Wing and bone appear soon after. Bone begot granite that is a hard substance, but then it takes us to violet, flower which brings

music in the world, Adam is produced through sweat and Ted Hughes does not say that God created Adam. Adam in turn created Mary who becomes the mother of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is God that is God is created by man. Now God being a creation of man cannot create anything except nothing will come, it is Never Never this Never Never created the crow. Now crow is the central concern of the poem and crow stands for destruction, annihilation, death, violence and all that is not good, all that is not creation. Birth in itself is destruction, so crow cries for blood, for crumbs of whatever it can get. Birth is no expectancy; there is nothing like Great Expectations as mostly writers think of.

There is an idea of mischief and we may well call it dualist laughter at the very idea of creation- the creation of this universe- man and woman, bird and beast, earth and heaven, all that we say as created by god or created by plentiful nature or by the fertile mother earth. In the poem entitled 'Crow Blacker than Ever', God is presented as disgusted with man and man as equally disgusted with God. There comes crow that nailed man and God together, that is, heaven and earth together. Earth and heaven have become diseased and sickly and there is no possibility of any redemption, there does not seem to be any saving grace, there is no escape either for man or God. There is no dignity, no sanctity. Man is no man and God is no God but crow is crow, what is, violence, creation is destruction. The poem concludes with a note of absolute destruction and frustration.

Crow Grinned

Crying: 'this is my creation,'

Flying the black flag of himself

The poem 'A Childish Prank', deals with the invention of sex. It takes us long back to the time when God happened to look at Adam and Eve for first time, They were so glad but satisfied to find themselves in the various colourful and fragrant flowers. Indeed Adam and Eve made it difficult for Him to enjoy a sound sleep. For crow, it was a matter of laughter, but for God it was a serious one. The most important thing in the poem is that it celebrates the idea that crow proved himself to be the inventor of sex. The poem goes on to say that crow proved himself better than God because it was he alone not God, for whom it became possible to invent sex, For this invention crow bit the world God's only son into two writhing halves, he stuffed the tail half with wounded and hanging out into man and the head half into woman.

'Crow's first lesson' is beautiful poetic creation on creation. It is a tale of creation beginning with the creation of a blue shark, a mosquito to the creation of man and woman and their sex organs. The poem beautifully brings the idea that creation begins with crow's pronouncement of his word 'Love.' Hence, it is equally highlighting the power of love that it is capable of creating anything. Ted Hughes endeavors to confirm the idea that love lies and at the roots of the whole creation. The tale of creation narrated through the point its roots the genesis. God one day taught crow how to talk. He asked the Crow to pronounce the word 'Love'. No sooner did the word 'Love' was uttered by crow than the white shark crashed into sea and rolled downwards. God once again asked crow to repeat the word 'Love. 'This time with the gaping and retching of the word love, man's body less had shown out on the earth. The crow retched, and woman's vulva dropped over man's neck. The poem is both, a poem commenting on the beginning of the creation, and one commenting on the extraordinary powers of love –

‘A final try, ‘said God. ‘Now, Love.’
Crow convulsed, gaped retched and
Man’s bodiless prodigious head
Bulged out onto the earth, with swiveling eyes,
Jabbering protest-
And crow retched again, before God could stop him.
And woman’s vulva dropped over man’s neck and tightened.
The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept
Crow flew guiltily off.

The poem 'Criminal Ballad' may also be called a birth poem with a little change in it. The poem aims at pointing out how the modern man is bound to suffer in the world. However, let us confine ourselves to the opening lines of the poem which give a glimpse into the birth of a man which makes him familiar with the ways of the world and which day by day leads him to the suffering which is inevitable to the modern man. The poem is a realistic tale of a man beginning from his birth to his escapism brought to him by constant catastrophe.

'A Horrible Religious Error' is another creation poem which deals with the creation of serpent after God had created man on earth. The poem celebrates the idea that the creation of serpent was a horrible error over committed by God. Serpent is nothing but an enemy of God

whereas man is not an enemy but a devotee of God. Man has an unshaken faith in God's will and always considers His will to be his piece. Man's fall on earth was caused by his disobedience to God as he committed the sin of tasting the forbidden fruit of knowledge. He could never make himself free of God. This is the very reason why he believes that God is the creator of universe, and that He is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. If man had been an enemy to God, he would never love spent his time in his worship and prayers. 'And man's and woman's knees melted, they collapsed. Their neck-muscles melted; their brows bumped the ground. Their tears evacuated visibly. They whispered 'your will is our peace.'

'Crow's Song of Himself' confirms the truth that God is the creator of everything in the world. He chose crow as an instrument or say, an agency to create several things such as gold, diamond, alcohol, money, day, and fruit. The man came into existence with the burial of crow was chopped into two parts. Thus, the poet beautifully tells us that everything including man and woman was created by God through crow.

When God hammered crow
He made gold
When God roasted crow in the sun
He made diamond
When God crushed crow under weights
He made alcohol
When God tore crow to pieces
He made money
When God blew crow up
He made day
When God hung crow on a tree
He made fruit
When God buried crow in the earth
He made man
When God tried to chop crow into two
He made woman
When God said: 'You win, crow,'
He made the redeemer.

When God went off in despair
Crow stropped his back and started in on the two thieves.

Death

The theme of several of the poems of Ted Hughes is 'death.' He deals with various aspects of death. Sometimes it speaks of death directly while at other times the element of death is interwoven in some other context. First as a death poem we have 'Roarers in a Ring.' It is a poem that begins with the trivial sound of a Christmas carol before being dramatically transformed into a tragic ballad. At the beginning of the poem there is nothing about death, but later when the group of drunken farmers falls off a cliff to death, it becomes a death poem. The poem is a tragic ballad, for the drunken farmers become images of deaths in a very dramatic way.

The air was new as a razor,
The moor looked like the moon,
When they all went roaring homewards
An hour before dawn,
Those living images of their deaths
Better than with skill
Bindley and rowdily balanced
Gently took their fall.'

'Six young men' is a celebrated death poem ever penned by Ted Hughes. It celebrates the idea that death is inevitable; man is mortal and time kills everyone, but art is more powerful than time because it is possible only for art to keep even the dead people alive. The poem reminds us of Cowper's more celebrated poem 'On the Receipt of my mother's picture out of Norfolk.' In that poem Cooper brings the idea that for art it is possible to keep one alive. This idea is conveyed by him through the narration of the painful story of his dead mother whom he lost when he was about six years old. He tells us how he much later got the picture of his dead mother from one of his cousins, and how he found the picture of his dead mother resembling his mother. The same idea is conveyed by Ted Hughes in his poem death poem entitled 'Six Young Men' in the context of six young friends who once had their group photograph drawn and who after sometime met their tragic death one by one. About four decades have passed, but in their

photograph they still seem to be alive. Thus, the poem confirms the claim that nothing in the world is capable of stopping time but art can stop the speed of time.

The celluloid of photograph holds them well,
Six young men and familiar to their friends,
Four decades that have faded and ochre -tinged,
This photograph has not wrinkled the face or the hands.
Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
Their shoes shine. One imparts and intimate smile,
One chews grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride –
Six months after this picture they were all dead.

‘Examination at the womb Door’ is wholly a death poem. Through the poem, Ted Hughes establishes the superiority of death to other things. But at the same time, she establishes the power of crow over death. Indeed, the poem speaks of the supreme power of death that makes it powerful enough to take everything in the world into its grip. The poem celebrates the idea that death is all powerful in the world, and that everybody in the world is bound to meet it. Death is too horrible and nobody wants to die willingly but man is helpless in this matter. The poem presents Ted Hughes’ philosophy of life that death is stronger than hope because so long as man is alive, he fails to see all his hopes into reality and so he dies with several of his unfulfilled hopes. According to Ted Hughes, death is stronger than will because everybody leaves the world unwillingly. Then the point is that death is stronger than love as every lover in the world has several promises made to his beloved, but he passes away without keeping all this during their courtship.

The poet then tells us as conclusion that death is stronger than life, for life is short while death is eternal. However, the poem ends with a thought-provoking generalization that only crow is stronger than death.

Who owns the whole rainy, stony earth? Death.

Who owns all of space? Death.

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.

'Crow's Account of the Battle', tells us the mysteries and misfortunes that overtake soldiers in one battle after another. The history of mankind is a history of bloodshed. We read of the painful death of the soldiers in the battle-field. The poem is very philosophical because it celebrates the idea that so long as the soldiers are alive, they suffer too much throughout their lives, and that it is only with their death that their suffering is over. Indeed, the poem becomes very touching when it tells us that the soldiers are killed mercilessly-

With here brains in hands, for example,
And there, legs in a treetop. There was no escape except into death.
Bones were too like lath and twigs
Blood was too like water,
Cries were too like silence.
The most terrible grimaces too like footprints in mud,
And shooting somebody through the midriff
Was too like striking a match
Too like putting up a snooker ball,
Too like tearing up a bill
Blasting the whole world to bits
Was too like slamming a door.

Conclusion

The stories of the Second World War are very much with the father of Ted Hughes and consequently with Ted Hughes himself. The father used to narrate the mishaps of various battles to the son. It is all about murder, bloodshed and killing and there is no respite from killing. The son is rather brought up on the killings of the Second World War. The poem entitled 'Out' presents the father and the son.

'My father sat in his chair recovering
From the four-year mastication by gunfire And mud,...

While I, small and four,
Lay on the carpet as his luckless double,
His memory's buried, Immovable anchor,
Among Jawbones and blown-off boots, Tree stumps,
Shell;-cases and creators, Under rain that goes on drumming its rods....

We are soon introduced to the birth of dead man. Here we get a terrible picture of one generation after another. Every generation is born to die. In such a world of bloodshed and killing there can be nothing like innocence. Birth and death are put together in the most dramatic way.

Then the nurse wraps him up, smiling,
And, though faintly, the mother is smiling,
And it's just another baby.
As after being blasted to bits
The reassembled infantryman tentatively totters out, gazing around with the eyes,
Of an exhausted clerk.

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