

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

— 12th Year of Open Access —

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 4 (August 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Eco-mythic Element in Ted Hughes's *Crow* Poems

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Article History: Submitted-15/07/2021, Revised-11/08/2021, Accepted-12/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

Abstract:

Ted Hughes discovers a new poetic style in *Crow* (1970) to extend his concerns about the human-centered development in Western culture. The central figure and image of crow in this poetic sequence reveals several qualitative shifts in vision of Ted Hughes. This paper deals with the eco-mythic reading of these poems to understand *Crow* mainly as a text fixed with the Anthropocene moment in human history. The poetic image of Crow carries a number of metaphorical layers. It also advances the metaphysical vision of the poet. His deep knowledge of mythologies and folklores is quite helpful in the formation of Crow as a reproduction of Trickster myth. This poetic agent of myth and environmental vision of Ted Hughes pass through metamorphosis of several kinds. The *Crow* poems figure out a fresh look at the relationship between Christianity, science and technology. Anticipating the ecological crisis looming from modernity's failure to commune with elements and forces of non-human world, the poet makes the readers familiar with a new reality – the Anthropocene turn.

Keywords: Nature, Culture, Environment, Anthropocene, Myth.

The publication of Ted Hughes's *Crow* (1970) echoes the dynamics a post-Holocaust world which is under siege of Anthropocene moment. This collection is a getaway from his own literary canon established with early poetry in *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal* and *Wodwo*. It is a turning point in Hughes's poetry and his environmental vision. His stylistic needs make him look toward multicultural sources. The poems in this volume display signs of creative interactions with indigenous cultures and myths. He emerges further a powerful voice of environmentalism. For this, he expands his critical look at prevalent forms of Christianity. Like the central image of Crow, he perceives them as partners and culprits in callous modernization.

The spiritual void created by this cultural scene is metaphorically conveyed through the paradoxical image of crow. Hughes believes that science and technology have created the contemporary cultural crisis in the West, including environmental degradation. The poetic image of Crow is full of metaphysical vision like that Hughes's animal imagery. His deep knowledge of mythologies and folklores has helped the formation of Crow. It is more than a Trickster myth. As a poetic functionality, this figure undergoes metamorphosis of several kinds. The *Crow* sequence basically deconstructs the relationship between Christianity, science and technology with overtly postmodern turns and twists.

This collection marks a distinct transition in the formation of mythical eco-poetic imagination of Ted Hughes. But the environmental vision of the poet is radically different in tone and imagery. The discussion to follow mainly examines the evidence of environmental issues in this poetic sequence. In order to revisit *Crow* poems from mythical eco-poetic perspective, the agency of crow is viewed in a special context that it seems to respond to and create. It is the advent of geological shift in age of earth as Anthropocene, a new epoch, completely appropriated by human interventions. The paradoxical presence of crow in this poetic work is filled with the similarly viewed cultural realities. Crow is functional in evoking multidimensional evidence of spiritual, historical and subjective disasters. As the central agency, crow is a sort of poetic and cultural agent putting itself to several uses. Its actions and expressions are not in the middle of an evolutionary process. Instead, its theological beginnings or end are missing and new ones introduced. For Ted Hughes, Crow is a logical appearance of a poetic agency. It facilitates his separation from traditional belief in religion. In "The Environmental Revolution" Hughes attacks the mythological foundation of 'Western Civilization':

The fundamental guiding ideas of our Western Civilization are against Conservation. They derive from Reformed Christianity and from Old Testament Puritanism. This is generally accepted. They are based on the assumption that the earth is a heap of raw materials given to man by God for his exclusive profit and use. The creepy crawlies which infest it are devils of dirt and without a soul, also put there for his exclusive profit and use. By the skin of her teeth, woman escaped the same role. (Faas 186)

Against the myths of Western Civilization Hughes brings the myths of *Crow*. In this warfare of myths, he reproduces tradition (Genesis, the crucifixion, St. George, etc.). As a result, he develops counter myths. The use of myth therefore allows Ted Hughes to attack Western Civilization without his appearing to preach or be didactic. Deriving from Eskimo and trickster myths, Hughes has created crow as completely disruptive and inconsistent to the core. Nature and principles of natural world have been a key pressure in creating *Crow* poems. Hence, it is difficult to ignore ecocritical potential of these poems. Even in mythical readings of crow image, it is the *environ* that provides clues of his poetics in action. A sweeping feature of the poems here is the inter linkage between environmental degradation and violence in different forms.

The idea of *Crow* is also Hughes's emphatic expression of his ecological vision. It originated when Leonard Baskin, an American sculptor, invited him to write poems for his engravings. Therefore, Crow emerges as a symbol of the life-force in a world haunted by the violent elemental forces of Nature whose survival seems almost impossible because of anthropogenic domination. To place the crow figure in mythical eco-poetic context, Adrian Head's observation further provides adequate clues:

Crow can be seen, amongst other things, as: an English Totem; a symbol for man himself; emblematic of collective or individual primitive urges (the unconscious) trying to assimilate civilized cultural notions; representing the buried instinct of man, impulsive and tenacious; and a 'super-simple' entity capable of cutting through 'the clutter of our civilized liberal confusion', whether here in England or in the world at large. (84)

Crow sequence ponders over the relationship between Christianity, science and technology. The poetic powers of Ted Hughes appear to serve internal force of the crow image. It evolves in the poems as a mythical pattern giving vent to the poet's environmental and cultural restlessness which are contemporary and modern in origins and aspirations.

According to Stuart Hirschberg, in *Crow* anthology, Hughes subverts the Christian mythology and produces a new mythology:

Singly and together the Crow poems comprise a sequence akin to a folk epic where a series of inventive and often surrealistic narratives reverse the Biblical account of the Creation, the Fall of man, the crucifixion of Christ, the Apocalypse and a number of Classical myths.

Within these poems Crow emerges as a creature from a primeval world who functions on a number of levels: as an elemental force in the universe, as a projection of man's instinctual nature scavenging on the dead constructs of his intellect and as an ancient symbol out of legends and folk mythology. (*Myth* 69)

In creating Crow as a mythic figure, Hughes has explored a variety of resources including the Trickster legend, Eskimo myths, Shamanism, Sufism etc. Hughes has discussed the most revealing explanation about Crow in the poem "Crow on the Beach" that his reading of the 'Trickster' tale becomes a guiding metaphor for the *Crow* poems. In an essay "Ted Hughes" Keath Sagar further explains the origin of Crow story:

An argument develops between God and his Nightmare about the adequacy of Man as a creation. God is very defensive of Man. Man is a very good and successful invention and given the materials and situation he's quite adequate. But whilst God is arguing with his nightmare, Man has sent up a representative to the gates of Heaven . . . to ask God to take life back because men are fed up with it. So God is enraged that man has let him down – so he challenges the voice to do better: given the materials and the whole set-up, to produce something better than Man. The Nightmare plunges back to "ferment and gestate in matter" and a little embryo begins. That is how Crow was created. (32)

Hence, as Sagar puts it, Crow is part of the changing direction of Hughes's environmental vision in the poetic sequence.

In composing the Crow poems, Hughes transcends his specific socio-cultural affiliation and becomes a spokesman of a global culture. His interest in anthropology, ecology, psychology and mythology urged him to move beyond Western tradition and find solace both for his personal crisis and the social crisis of his day in the primitive culture. As an animal agency of energetic and unpredictable temper, Ted Hughes constantly puts the crow as well as the readers to scrutinize the cultural constructions of 20th and 21st century. The chief protagonist Crow does not move by the distractions of science and progress. He fixes his gaze on the total constellation of the universe. He tries to comprehend sympathetically the struggle and the suffering of the universe as its own. The Crow representing common man holds conversations with everything he meets – rocks, trees and rivers because "[e]verything sings its own song about itself" (Sagar, *The*

Laughter 175). Since he represents common man, he regularly tries to identify with the pretensions and illusions of the human world but fails in all his endeavors. He cannot escape his own instincts and impulses.

Ted Hughes makes use of multicultural myths throughout the collection. Mythical interpretations of poems which are many will be referred in the course of this discussion. However, the focus remains on the poetic construction of crow in specific context of the poet's mood, functioning of imagination and relationship with contemporary culture. Ted Hughes considers that Catholic Christianity when in control of Western culture had better co-existence with natural forms of life on earth. For him, 'reformation' within the Christian faith and practices has narrowed its religiosity and bindings with the natural world have been weakened. "Crow's Account of St George" puts in questions the popular Christian myth of the 'killing of the dragon' by St. George. In this poem St George is presented as "a civilized man, a mathematician, nuclear physicist, bio-chemist" (Sagar 121). St George in medieval mythology is a patron saint of knighthood, who is depicted as a warrior holding a lance poised to slay the evil serpent or dragon. After repeated attempts he succeeds in killing. And finally, the protagonist reacts:

Steps out of the blood-wallow. Recovers –

Drops the sword and runs dumb-faced from the house

Where his wife and children lie in their blood. (CP 225-226)

In order to redeem humanity from the curse of death and destruction, St George had killed the demon with the help of mathematical calculations. Hughes's satiric treatment of St George is a part of his understanding of environmental crisis. The Christian saint in this poem has betrayed old faith by separating the 'demon' and divine. Robinson has a point to make, "Hughes does not tell the St George story in anything like its original terms, instead making it an occasion for pointing up the presence of the same suppressive and externalizing mentality in the modern scientist" (60).

By reconstructing the Crow myth constantly, Hughes in "Crow's Last Stand" and "Crow and Stone" renders the trickster-crow in relation to natural elements. Unlike earlier instances of poems in which Crow is bodily crow, and in reflections and responses thoroughly anthropogenic,

in both the poems he is in the classical space of mythical reality with representational features of non-human and natural world. "Crow and Stone" dramatizes this conflict with profound implications on the ecological crisis in a global context:

Stone, Champion of the globe, lumbered towards him . . .

But by now the stone is a dust – flying in vain,

And crow has become a monster – his mere eyeblink

Holding the very globe in terror. (*CP* 253)

Hughes's memories of Calder Valley and the glaring hill and rocks mark a direct presence in his symbolic idiom. The interdependence of 'stone' and the 'sun' in "Crow's Last Stand" inheres an exchange of meaning and broad cultural reality. The environmental and cultural understanding of Ted Hughes sustains its urgency and poetic intensity from "the separation of mankind from the closer-to-nature religion" and the guiltless progression in the secular and scientific direction of "the anthropomorphism and, beyond that, the abstraction of the more patriarchal religions" (Head 148). The anthropogenic ethos prevailing over the old and non-dualistic phases of Christianity symbolized in Crow myth have to pass through the 'womb door' in Hughes's poetics. An ecocritical dialogue with "Crow's First Lesson", "Crow Communes" and "A Childish Prank" help in decoding the extent of spiritual degeneration that the 'abstraction' and dualism of nature/culture, Christian/pagan and science/myths have caused in Christianity.

In "A Childish Prank", God as believed in dominant forms and practices of religions is a fallible figure. He is depicted as a much inferior being than as he figures in *The Bible*. The crow plays pranks against Christianity and deftly extends a critique of the popular Christian beliefs in jovial mood and manner. Ironically, Adam and Eve – creations of God, are without souls:

Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls,

Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert

On the flowers of Eden.

God pondered. (*CP* 215)

The divine figure constructed is so humanized and divested of supernatural and divine element that “The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep” (*CP* 215). The condition and traits, Hughes attributes to God, are consequence of a dualism that he failed to address. The Crow steps in to intervene in God’s creation of Adam and Eve. Crow is successful in producing biological basis of sex as – the construction of male sexuality:

Crow laughed.

He bit the Worm, God’s only son,

Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half

With the wounded end hanging out. (*CP* 216)

And Eve, the archetypal woman, Crow conducts Adam like surgery, “He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman / And it crept in deeper and up” (*CP* 216). This Crow generated ‘sex’, the poet seems to suggest is because God had withdrawn in the very process of His Creation of Adam and Eve.

An underlying element in the vision of Ted Hughes is towards his deep view on the growing impact of humanistic thought on religion and natural world. This converges with the poet’s realization that these poems announce the advent of Anthropocene on earth in a number of ways. The anthropocentric impact on Christian mythology losing its spiritual role is further foregrounded in “Crow’s Theology” and “Apple Tragedy”. Placing Crow in “well-established Biblical contexts” (Lodge 68), the poet invests the catalyst Crow with qualities stereotypical of Satan but concurrent with its trickster function in indigenous cultures. In “Apple Tragedy” Hughes deconstructs myth of Original Sin and cultural attitude toward ‘sex’ in visibly anthropocentric evolution of humankind. Sarcastically reconstructing the myth, he holds God equally responsible for the “Apple Tragedy” which is suggested as a farce that unfolded in divine presence. Here, God is nothing but an interlocutor with little control over His Creation:

Eve drank and opened her legs

And called to the cockeyed serpent

And gave him a wild time.

God ran and told Adam

Who in drunken rage tried to hang himself in the orchard. (*CP* 250)

In materialist ecocriticism as well as Eco-feminist approach, the duality of body/soul, human/nature, sex/spiritual is part of cultural engineering of patriarchy. It is this dualism that has subsequently naturalized into human consciousness and cultural attitude.

Hughes in “Crow Blacker than Ever” further employs the Crow agency to expose God who is out of connections with His own Creation, Adam and Eve. As the supreme divine in Christianity, in this poem also God reappears with the same ‘exhausted’ and ‘snoring’ self – a construction and plaything of anthropocentrism. While creating Adam and Eve, God placed them in a garden with the ‘fruit of knowledge’ – the divine tool of dual consciousness. But as soon as this duality between the feminine/masculine, body/soul and God/His Creation opens up, it is the agency of Crow that glues, however farcically, the two “Crow nailed them together, / Nailing heaven and earth together.” Otherwise:

When God, disgusted with man,

Turned towards Heaven.

And man, disgusted with God,

Turned towards Eve,

Things looked like falling apart. (*CP* 244)

In “Crow’s Theology”, the poet articulates his well sustained belief and widely maintained argument that Christianity was “just another provisional myth” (Faas 205). Making use of imagery from modern technology and warfare, Hughes’s understanding of Gods as more than one – the one appropriated by anthropocentrism and the other escaping it surfaces:

. . . there were two Gods –

One of them much bigger than the other

Loving his enemies

And having all the weapons. (*CP* 227)

The verbal around ‘god’ is inspired by Hughes’s environmentalism. His cultural interest in indigenous cultures, myths and spiritual practices makes his poetic style distinct here. Anthropocentric inroads into Christianity have incapacitated God descending from biblical narratives. The theology of Crow indulges with both – God and god, but “One of them much bigger than the other”. The suggestion of counter-theology and religion, as Hugh Underhill points out, is because “nature is larger and older than human consciousness, reigns over man, not man over it” (272-73). The counter of Christian and other theologies is “Crow’s Theology”.

This counter-theology spells out its myth of Genesis in “Two Legends” and “Lineage”. Ted Hughes puts forward how the separation between light and darkness is an eternal conflict. It is not only a conflict between order and chaos, light and darkness, but is a conflict between God and Goddess, reason and instinct, rationality and irrationality. It is this primitive chaos and darkness which the poem metaphorically presents through Crow as a myth. Hovering over the creation, the Crow is “bent in emptiness / over emptiness” (*CP* 217). The repetition of black colour for bodily organs of the Crow also characterizes all created things and beings including the space and environs surrounding them. “Crow’s Theology” springs from a charred cultural reality metaphorically resembling traditional myths of Genesis, but reversing their divine and mystic tones:

Black was the without eye

Black the within tongue

Black was the heart

Black the liver, black the lungs” (*CP* 217)

‘Black’ recurs as the colour of everything within and outside. It has dissolved all dualities of dark and light to the extent that even the ‘soul’ is imagined in black form.

“Lineage” challenges the Christian doctrine of Genesis and shifts the focus from ‘black’ to Crow. At beginning of the universe there was not the ‘Word’, but ‘Scream’. It is ‘Scream’ that is the origin of everything. The questions raised are rhetorical and indirectly explain earlier instance of exhausted ‘God’ as the whole mythology that created Him is inadequate. The poet uses the verb ‘beget’ almost allegorically and interchangeably for ‘creation’, “Who beget Adam / Who beget Mary / Who beget God.” He further writes:

Who beget Crow

Screaming for blood

Grubs, crusts,

Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth. (*CP* 218)

This account of creation reverses the biblical order of events so that the appearance of God comes after that of humans. Thus, it suggests that God appears as a product of human imagination. This Christian belief is castigated by the poet. In this poem God has been begotten by Mary, the mother or the female principle. God could only produce “Nothing”. Crow represents primitive chaos and darkness. It has been born out of nothing. Jarold Ramsey notes that “Lineage” is a “mockery of Biblical genealogies” and an illustration of how Hughes “seems to be intent, with the help from world folklore, on re-writing portions of Creation itself so that the first story in our book of human predicaments is more consistent with the chapters in which we live” (178).

Ted Hughes's use of rituals in patterns indicates that poetry is another magical charms/spiritual tool. Channeling this tool, by writing poetry, is for Hughes a way of connecting to the powerful forces of the natural world. Yet, for him the myths are not merely the source of power, they are the tools to control energies whether they are conscious or unconscious, sacred or profane, good or bad. So, to find meaning of ostensibly meaningless life, Hughes has dexterously used the myths with fresh perspective and used folktales for their original and intrinsic association with the unspoiled life of the non-human world. Therefore, *Crow* offers a poetic challenge to the basic values and worldviews of Western cultural and religious traditions.

Ted Hughes treats scientific progress as a major partner of weakened Christianity. Both factors are employed to foreground his Earth-centric cultural values and issue a subtle warning to the readers that within Crow figure and his behavior the Anthropocene reality is factual.

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