

## **Ted Hughes and the Unconscious: Visualizing Ted Hughes's Poems through the Looking Glass of Sigmund Freud**

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**Abstract:** *The link between the natural world and writing poetry is one of the keys to understanding Ted Hughes's work. This paper sheds light on Hughes's attempts to make vocal the inner life or the depths of human unconscious. Hughes's poetic philosophy harps with the tune of Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Freud's 'id' suggested a more subtle way in which the bestial and the instinctive could figure in human psyche. The interaction of the human and the beast worlds have taken the form of depicting human life in terms of some notion of animal behavior. This has served many purposes-to embody specific human emotions, often uncontrolled emotions, to depict a way of escaping human limitations, especially seeming narrowness of city life, morality or purely intellectual discernments. Similarly Hughes's poems depict a breaking free from some perceived set of social or political limitations that the writer wishes to expose and change. By revolutionizing our understanding of the inner workings of the unconscious Ted Hughes was a major influence on the twentieth century thought.*

**Keywords:** *Ego, Eros, Id, Primitivism, Racial unconscious, Shamanism, Superego, Thanatos*

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Ted Hughes is the greatest British writer of the second half of twentieth century and one of the latest addition to the great tradition of Western Literature which includes, among many others, Homer, the Greek tragic poet, Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and the other post-war East European poets. In accordance with Eliot's dictum that every new great writer added to the tradition, changes the tradition, Hughes has changed the way we read all the writers and he possesses the kind of imagination which issues in the purest poetry, charged poetry, visionary, revelatory poetry that sees into the life of things, that takes over where all other modes of apprehending reality falter. Words, though controlled up to a point, are allowed to retain a life of their own and express more than the poet consciously knows. "His imagination", as said by Keith Sagar, "which draws on his unconscious, on the racial unconscious, on his sixth sense and perhaps innumerable further senses speaks through him." [1]

The images of animals described in Hughes's poems constitute an emblematic bestiary which helps to convey Hughes's most important themes: heroism and survival, myth, attitudes to sexuality and the role and function of the poet. Animal images are the central focus for Hughes's important mythic presentation: metamorphosis as an image of indestructibility of life, and the god-animal as symbol for creative and destructive forces in nature. Sexuality is such a creative force: the uninhibited actions of animals provide Hughes with useful images for his exploration of the attitudes and sexual practices of modern man. These animal images are presented in part, through an emblematic bestiary and in part, through the "animal" nature of the central character, the Dr. Jekyll plus his demonic double, Mr Hyde, who becomes, microscopically, a representative of the physical, sexual, "animal" side of man.

Different critics have approached Hughes's poems from different angles. Some critics like Thomas Nye (London Times Contributor) has tried to find out the reasons of Hughes's too much obsession with animals and discovered that apparently Hughes's love of animals was one of the catalysts in his decision to become a poet. He further said that Hughes began writing poems in adolescence, when it dawned upon him that his earlier passion for hunting animals in his native Yorkshire ended either in the possession of a dead animal, or at best a trapped one. Hughes wanted to capture not just live animals, but the aliveness of animals in their natural state: their wilderness, the fox-ness of the fox and the crow-ness of the crow. PR King said that Hughes showed us the tie that exists between the human world and the animal world. He said that Hughes's concentration on animals is his attempt to clarify his feelings on the human condition. Infact Hughes's poetry broke upon a dead decade in English Literature into the social-democratic sheepishness of "The Movement" and the *New Lines* anthology and brought "a sudden sharp hot stink of fox" reiterating the perennial romantic notion of poetic inspiration as something atavistic and instinctual, a thing of the blood and gut.

John Keble, in the series of Latin lectures *On the Healing Power of Poetry*-published in 1844 proposed a thoroughgoing proto-Freudian literary theory. "Poetry", Keble claimed, "is the indirect expression...of some overpowering emotion, or ruling taste, or feeling, the direct indulgence whereof is somehow repressed"; this repression is imposed by the author's sentiments of "reticence" and "shame"; the conflict between the need for

expression and the compulsion to repress such self-revelation is resolved by the poet's ability to give "healing relief to secret mental emotion, yet without detriment to modest reserve" by a literary "art which under certain veils and disguises...reveals the fervent emotions of the mind"; and this disguised mode of self-expression serves as "a safety valve, preserving men from madness." [2] Thus we see that poetry gives a cathartic relief to the conflicts going on in mind between the desire to express one's fervent emotions and the repression imposed by the society through its laws and codes which disable a human being from expressing himself fully. Ted Hughes's also serves this purpose. Hughes noticed that modern man is too much dominated by rationality, objectivity, intellectuality at the expense of the life of emotion and imagination which has its base in the instinctual sources of energy to relieve man from the dryness and narrowness of modern existence, from the absurd, godless, scientific universe. He wanted to bring back the primitive state of existence, rejecting the modern culture. The only way left to bring back the primitivism in a controlled form and rejuvenate the modern people is poetry. Thus poetry serves as a "healing relief to the secret mental emotions" and save him from madness of hectic modern existence.

Sigmund Freud, the famous psychiatrist, turned to myths, legends, fairy tales for material illustrative of basic human instincts, conflicts, yearnings. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud offers one of his many tributes to the power of poets to evoke remnants of a mythical past which lies buried in the human unconscious: "The deepest and eternal nature of man, upon whose evocation in his hearers the poet is accustomed to rely, lies in those impulses of the mind which have their roots in a childhood that has since become prehistoric." [3] In this passage dream and myth are equated in their power to reveal feelings, too painful for conscious awareness.

Harping in the tune of Freud, Hughes also shows a deep interest in primitive beliefs and superstitions; in writing many of his poems, he draws upon ancient archetypal myths and legends and also creates certain personal myths in order to lay bare the workings of the human unconscious. Not only through myths, Hughes also takes recourse to animals—especially the violence of the savage animals, that is to say, he probes into nature "red in tooth and claw" to bring out the "violence" or what he calls "vehement activity" or the instinctual energy lying hidden within human beings, and of which the modern men are completely unaware. In *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud reveals his interest in the elucidation of myths through the insight that dreams provide: "In the manifest content of dreams we very often find pictures and situations recalling familiar themes in fairy tales, legends and myths. The interpretation of such dreams thus throws light on the original interests which created these themes." [4] Thus Hughes's use of the myths, legends, fables and minute depiction of the violent animal world are just the "manifest" elements (according to Freud), which have an undercurrent of the "latent" elements preserved within them.

According to Freud there are two essentially different classes of instincts: the sexual instincts, understood in the broader sense as Eros, and the aggressive instincts, Thanatos, whose aim is destruction. Aggressiveness turned upon the self becomes an expression of death instinct. Thus the erotic or life instinct and the death instinct constitute the basic impulses or drives within human psyche. Freud gives his opinion in *Civilization and its Discontents* that human civilization is progressing but towards self destruction. The only hope remains is Eros or the instinctual energies which can save man from total destruction. Harping in the tune of Freud, Hughes also wants to propagate the same idea through his poems that human civilization, through continual technological progress, is leading them to self destruction. The only thing that can save them is to bring back the "vehement energies" which will thereby bring back hope in man's life.

"The Thought Fox" (from Volume *The Hawk in the Rain* 1957), *Theology* (from the volume of poems entitled *Wodow*) and "A Childish Prank" (from volume entitled *Crow*) are some of the poems of Hughes which I will try to explain from Freudian perspective. Freud divided the human mind into two halves—the conscious and the unconscious and we find the clear manifestation of it in Hughes's poem "The Thought Fox". "The Thought Fox" has often been acknowledged as one of the most completely realized and artistically satisfying of the poems in Ted Hughes's first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. The poet in this poem senses a presence which disturbs him:

Through the window I see no star:  
Something more near  
Though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness. (The Thought Fox)

The disturbance is not in the external darkness of the night, for the night is itself a metaphor for the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet's unconscious in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring. Not only the 'darkness' of the night, but also the image 'midnight moment's forest' serves as a metaphor for the poet's unconscious. At first the idea has no clear outlines; it is not seen but felt—frail and intensely vulnerable. The poet's task is to coax it out of formlessness and into fuller consciousness by the sensitivity of his language. The fox, at the end of the poem, after hesitating warily, suddenly shoots across the clearings: "Of a body that is bold to come/Across clearings..." The 'clearings' may be the clear conscious mind into which the fox has arrived from the depths of the unconscious, waiting to be printed on the page. At last the fox "with a sudden

sharp hot stink of fox/It enters the dark hole of the head.”[5]The fox enters the lair of the head as it would enter its own lair, bringing with it the hot, sensual, animal reek of its body and all the excitement and power of the achieved vision.

It might be suggested that the sensibility behind Hughes's poem is more than that of an intellectual- an intellectual, who, in rebellion against his own ascetic rationalism, tries to burn down and capture an element of his own sensuality and intuitive identity that lurks in the depth of his unconscious which he does not securely possess. According to the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis the human mind has three layers-id, ego and superego. The 'id' is the source of all libidinal desires which Hughes wants to bring forth but in a controlled form. And so he pins the fox upon the page with the cruel purity of artistic form and locates its lair inside his own head. The conflict of sensibility which Hughes unconsciously dramatizes in *The Thought Fox* runs through all his poetry. On the one hand there is in his work an extraordinary sensuous and sensual generosity which co exists with a sense of abundance and a capacity for expressing tenderness. Hughes himself seems consistently to see his own poetic sensitivity as 'feminine' and his poetry frequently gives the impression that he can allow himself to indulge this sensitivity only within a protective shell of hard, steely 'masculine' violence.

Thus we can say that the underlying pattern of the poem is one of sensitivity-within-toughness: it is one in which a sensuality or sensuousness which might sometimes be characterized as 'feminine' can be incorporated into the identity only to the extent that it has been purified by, or subordinated to a tough, rational, artistic will. Thus this medium of poetry allows Hughes to express his fervent sensual desires in an indirect, controlled form and thus preserves him from madness. This is the healing power of poetry.

Now we shall move on to the next poem under our analysis- "A Childish Prank" (From the volume entitled *Crow*).Freud had emphatically said in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* that myth is an expression of unconscious wish, fear and instinctual drives, and the use of myth as an analytical device, which can reveal truth through its unique illusions and distortions. Here Hughes has made an exhaustive use of two myths-the traditional archetypal Genesis myth and his personal myth-the Crow myth.

Hughes published his Crow volume in 1970 with fifty-nine poems which was enlarged in 1972 with the addition of seven poems. Hughes learnt about myths from Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* and Paul Radin's *The Trickster*. The word "prank" (in A Childish Prank) means a naughty action or a light mischief. The bodies of a man and a woman lay on the ground in the Garden of Eden, lifeless, staring foolishly, dull and devoid of any kind of energy. While god was completely passive and helpless in this situation, the crow took the initiative of infusing life within them. The crow then caught hold of God's only son, the Serpent, bit it into two writhing halves and thrust the two halves into the bodies of Adam and Eve, thereby bringing them into life. Adam and Eve were then locked in a close embrace and got busy performing the sexual act. Thus we see that Hughes has here exposed the absurdity of God's Creation as described in the Bible.

Frye views the vast corpus of the literary universe which stands on different types of myths as its base, created and thereby shaped by human imagination to quell fears and fulfill wishes by reducing nature in all its threatening vastness and incomprehensibility in a set of basic, fundamental manageable archetypal forms. But Hughes observes in modern man a reluctance to acknowledge the deepest, instinctual sources of energy, an energy that is related to the elemental power circuit of the universe, to which animals are closer than man.P.R King in *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction* observes that Hughes's poetry written since 1970 has moved on to express a sense of sterility and nihilism in modern man's response to life, a response which he connects with the dominance of man's rational, objective intellect at the expense of the life of emotion and imagination.Hughes,who want to present the psyche of modern man, can't do with the help prevalent, universal myths because modern men are completely alienated from nature or any form of religious explanation in which he can believe and thereby faces an apparently meaningless existence in which pain and evil frequently outweigh any redeeming possibilities. That is why Hughes either inverts or distorts the archetypal myths, or creates personal myths in order to convey this experience of an absolute nihilism in modern man. For this reason Hughes made a transfer from the English Tripods to Archeology and Anthropology, which confirmed that taste for the primitive and the exotic, the alien and the mystic, that finds its fullest expression in "Crow". Hughes's Crow myth sets about expressing his sense of modern man's inner world. Thus P.R King in *Nine Contemporary Poets* says, "The outer world has become the dominant existence in man's cosmology as a result of the rise of science. The dispassionate eye of objectivism has destroyed the last myth that helped to relate man to his inner and outer worlds-the myth of Christianity. This and all religions can no longer perform their task of humanizing the cosmic drama and giving a form and shape to the instinctual energies. The cause of much of modern man's feeling of alienation from those deep powers both within himself and from the outer world is the destruction of this humanizing language. Crow is the only language remaining and his songs sing that of alienation.”[6]Thus if we consider King's comment in the perspective of this very poem becomes a kind of 'Black Genesis'. The Crow can also be considered as a part of the chaos that existed before the creation of the

universe. This image of Crow further intensifies the dark, violent, death-ridden universe, he describes in his volume "Crow". But we see that crow has wings which is a symbol of hope. Thus Hughes's creation of Crow myth also depicts that beneath the feelings of complete despair there was still an active voice of unyielding energy and survival. Thus crow was created by Hughes to express the idea that even a life of great pain and suffering could still contain an irreducible force for survival. Among other things, Crow is the spirit of endurance, of vitality, the basic grit of survival at bottom of even the worst experience. In the poem "A Childish Prank", the crow invents sex which brings vitality within man and woman and it is the sex-act which represents the reproductive process which has led to a multiplication of animals and human beings. The man and the woman in this poem come to life and become vital only when the sex-urge, the id in them (the source of libidinal desires), the voyeur of 'pleasure principles' is awakened and then fulfilled. Thus Crow here represent the real creator while god falls asleep.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, illustrating the point that an instinct is a drive "inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things", Freud turns to "a myth rather than to a scientific explanation" because the former "fulfills precisely the one condition whose fulfillment we desire." [7] The myth, of course is Aristophanes' explanation in the symposium of the origin of the sexual instinct in the strivings of split human beings to unite again. In this poem "A Childish Prank" we see that Hughes also takes recourse to the same concept mentioned above. God created man and woman as two separate human beings, but Crow tries to restore "an earlier state of things" by originating in them the sexual instinct which will again restore the original state of things-that is, a complete 'organic life.'

But Crow, although the initiator of sex, didn't bring the sexual instincts within man and woman on its own- it needed the help of God's only son-the Worm(Serpent).The Serpent which is traditionally the symbol of death, here becomes the phallic symbol of life-"the tail half/with the wounded end hanging out"- "A Childish Prank". This image of a snake as a phallic symbol was also given by Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* where Freud says "Many of the beasts which are used as genital symbols in mythology and folklore play the same part in dream: example. Fishes, snails, cats, mice and above all those most important symbols of the male organ-snakes." [8] Thus we see that Hughes, through his depiction of the sensual desires through the image of Crow, achieves a 'healing relief' through poetry.

Now we shall move on to the next poem, "Theology" (from the volume entitled *Wodow*) which too harps in the same tune of the previous poem. Here also we find Hughes depicting the experience of modern man through the inverted Genesis myth. According to the general view, it was the serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempted Eve to eat the apple which Adam and Eve had been forbidden by god to eat. But this belief is wrong and is merely a distortion of the real facts. The truth is that Adam ate the apple, that Eve ate Adam and that the Serpent ate Eve. This is the real answer to the whole mystery of the Creation. Here also God remains passive throughout the whole poem.

Here 'apple' denotes the knowledge of sex,'Eve ate Adam'-here the verb 'ate' means gratifying the sexual hunger, the deep instinctual desires that lie in the unconscious. 'Serpent ate Eve'- 'Serpent' is a famous Freudian symbol which denotes phallus. Thus here the Serpent may denote the penetration of hymen. The famous critic Alan Bold is of the opinion that in an earlier poem ("Mayday on Holderness") Hughes has discovered the Serpent inside himself, a snaky intestine that eats away at the Eden apprehended in childhood. Thus the Serpent can also be related to id-the sensual desires which are deep seated in our unconscious.

To conclude this thesis on Ted Hughes, the words of Keith Sagar are worth mentioning, "I believe Hughes to be a great poet because he possesses the kind of imagination which issues in the purest poetry, charged poetry, visionary, revelatory poetry that sees into life of things ,that takes over where all other modes of apprehending reality falter. It is imagination, which draws on his unconscious, on the racial unconscious, on his sixth sense and perhaps innumerable further senses, speaks through him. He is, in a word, 'inspired'...He performs a function essential to the race, a function analogous to that performed in a more primitive cultures by the shaman, whose function is to make the dangerous journey, on behalf of his society, into the spirit world, which is to say, into his own unconscious." [9]

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