
Death and Shamanism in Ted Hughes' Poetry

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Abstract: *Ted Hughes survived the suicide of his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath and her influence on his work cannot be underestimated. Hughes sought to express the inexpressible and knew that shamanism, death, and art were all somehow, on a fundamental level, intertwined and inextricable with the human experience. Hughes' poetry in particular, can act as portals to this unseen work of abstraction and sublimation, expressing in verse the contents of the spirit. The poet believed the act of articulating the physical vagaries of the beauty and bizarreness of the death state, we could somehow come closer to the non-physical, spirit world; a world all-too real. This spirit world is what fascinated both Hughes, Plath. Shamanism is often acts as the intermediary between the human/physical world and the world of the superphysical/spiritual. It seeks to connect the two seemingly disparate realms with commonality, a sense that they are not as disparate as we assume. To Hughes the two worlds are two sides of the same coin- one unable to exist without the other. The intangibility of the spirit/soul is made tangible through his poetry.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the book *Ted Hughes*, Thomas West wrote, "The poet, according to Hughes, is a healer of the community as well as of himself, a medicine man, a marabout, a shaman." Hughes' poetry, when compared to many of his contemporaries, seem to scratch at matters hidden just beneath the surface of the everyday and ordinary. They lend a subtle yet actively participatory ear to vibrations that are just beyond human reach and they pursue answers to questions that are often asked by those in seemingly disconnected areas of thought.

2. DEATH AND SHAMANISM

It is my assumption that the shamanic elements found in Hughes' poetry, influenced and were reflected in, how he treated the theme of death. He saw death as neither evil, nor necessarily, the absolute end of life. He did not see death as the evil harbinger of soul and body annihilation but rather, he regarded it through a more speculatively-mystical eye. An integral aspect of shamanism, death, is considered on equal footing with birth. This belief coincides with that of many eastern religions and philosophies. They share similarly non-nihilistic views of death. The spirit is thought to move onto other planes of existence or into new bodies or shells. Though western Christianity also espouses an afterlife, it is an afterlife with strictly defined parameters and it is an afterlife that is gained through strict adherence to dogma and faith. The nihilism found in many post-modern works is a reaction against this strict and somewhat arcane system of admittance into the afterlife. Hughes' treatment of death in his poetry reflects views that are quite un-post modern. By contrast, poets such as Wilfred Owen and Philip Larkin's treatment of the death theme involved a morbidity and hopelessness, rarely seen in Hughes' work

Stuart Hirschberg's Introduction in *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes* is illuminating in that it portrays Hughes and Hughes' work within a larger, deeper, more philosophically - centered framework.

Throughout his career as poet, Hughes's continuing absorption with the psychological, moral, social, and religious symbolism derived from ancient mythologies bespeaks a mind trying to re-establish touch with the heritage of a long vanished past. These ancient archetypes reverberate in his poetry with an evocativeness, continuity and power that makes much of contemporary poetry seem bloodless by comparison. (Hirschberg, 9)

The re-establishment of a link between our present-day, mechanized, and spiritless world, with that of the relatively spirit-rich and archaic past, constitutes a major part of why Hughes' work is so transcendent and thought-provoking. *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* is concerned in part with Hughes as a "self-sufficient, self-centered shaman." Regarding Hughes' poetry as containing certain elements of shamanism is, a key in truly understanding the depth and vision Hughes had as an artist. It is an interpretive tool we can use in order to better grasp his message. Hirschberg is cognizant of the fact that though shamanistic, Hughes' work is more an amalgamation of different yet

symbiotic, parts or elements. He reasons that Hughes' poetry was a result of inter-dependent factors: "myths and legends," "universal archetypes," and the poet's own personal tragedies faced in life. These personal tragedies probably refer in large part to his marriage to, and the eventual suicide of his wife, poet Sylvia Plath. Her influence on Hughes' poetry is immense, unquantifiable and fit for a larger study than this. Hirschberg provides a clear and neat explanation to answer some of the criticisms often directed at Hughes. The explanation goes so far as to allow for a direct link between Hughes use of the animal motif and his shamanism. Hirschberg explains:

In a way his emphasis on violence, death and brutality is a ritual submergence and submission to the inevitable death of the old self that must precede the liberation and emergence of the authentic self, to gain access to the power habitually held in check by society. The relationship between Hughes and the terrifying predators he describes is like that of the shaman to his totem animal. (Hirschberg13)

Hirschberg often quotes Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Eliade's book is considered by many to be an indispensable source on modern studies of shamans and shamanism. Hirschberg's contentions parallel Eliade's when he writes "...shamanism basically is not a regression into animal life, but is instead an acquisition of a 'superhuman mode of being'." He continues by stating that many of the characters in Hughes' poems are "drastically reduced, limited, and disassociated." Because of this, Hughes considered the animal perspective as quite revelatory, and in opposition to that of the static, ill-equipped tools of perception we hold as humans. Hughes' concerns lie in the larger themes of cosmos, life, death, and existence but he chooses to explore those themes on a much smaller and more personal scale. In his book, *Ted Hughes*, Thomas West writes, "...one might judge Ted Hughes...to be a poet struggling with perceptions of truths larger than awareness itself." West's asserts that Hughes' work is intrinsically shamanic, cosmic, yet inward-looking. Hirschberg further comments:

For Hughes the significance of shamanism, that is, the fusion with the mythical life of certain animals, is the sense of power it offers, communion with cosmic life and force, and a recentering of the personality and a corresponding sense of the renewal of the universe as an ecstatic and euphoric experience. (Hirschberg, 11)

Obviously, Hirschberg is relating just one facet of shamanism; the human identification with certain archetypal animals. His argument here is concerned with Hughes' interest and identification with the hawk in 'Hawk Roosting.' Hughes uses the "I" voice as he sees the world through the eyes of a hawk. He is enamored by the hawk's "self-centredness" and "single-mindedness." Hughes' shamanism is reflected by his willingness to forego his own personality or, in Freudian terms, foregoing his "ego." His hawk is a manifestation of his own desire to fly free of human constraints and a grasping at the true meaning of the cosmos. Hirschberg writes that the Hughes' animals are motifs that symbolize "...his reaction against a rationalistic demand for civilization carried so far that everything around one is habitually humanized, tainted with the rationalistic self." Hirschberg continues by hypothesizing that Hughes, like past shamans, pursue a knowledge about the "unknown forces governing the universe." Hughes' hawk is a deliberately inner-looking commentary upon reality and death itself.

The allotment of death.

For the one path of my flight is direct

Through the bones of the living.

No arguments assert my right:

(Hawk Roosting, 5th stanza)

Death is, here, a fact of life, value-less and devoid of morality or philosophy. Because death is treated so matter-of-factly, its morbidity is lightened. Hughes' treatment of death is centered upon this notion. Hughes' often clinically detailed, and detached observations of dead animals, is an issue worth mentioning. Following are two stanzas: one from 'View of a Pig' and the other from 'February 17th.' There is an obvious sense of detachment in both stanzas regarding death and I believe that the detachment is the direct product of Hughes' fascination with the spiritual and transcendent nature of death rather than merely the physical one.

Such weight and thick pink bulk
Set in death seemed not just dead.
It was less than lifeless, further off.
It was like a sack of wheat
(View of a Pig, 2nd Stanza)

The corpse that would not come. Til it came.
And after it the long, sudden yolk-yellow
Parcel of life
In a smoking slither of oils and soups and syrups—
And the body lay born, beside the hacked-off head.
(February 17th, 2nd stanza)

The simile in the final line of the excerpt from 'A View of a Pig,' compares the dead bulk of the dead pig to a "sack of wheat." The life fluids that had just sustained the now dead still-born lamb are described as "a smoking slither of oils and soups and syrups." Hughes' mind seems to be a dichotomy between the empathetic poet and the detached observer. His voice shows no emotion to the deaths faced but it is also mesmerized, fascinated by death as well. Whether alive, powerful and omniscient like the hawk, or dead, meaningless and "less than lifeless" like the pig and lamb, Hughes usage of animals in his poems reveal his shamanic tendencies. In *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts rely on Mircea Eliade in his book *Shamanism*, as did Hirshberg, to help define shamanism in relation to western thought. They state that though "it is clearly impossible for a modern English poet to *be* shaman, but equally clearly Hughes's preoccupations with the unconscious, with death, with the animal world and mythology show an affinity with the shaman's function." Stating the obvious that Hughes himself was not an actual tribal shaman, they do reiterate my stance that Hughes served a shamanic function in society. Roberts continues, "What a poet such as Hughes ultimately shares with the shaman is a concern for psychic equilibrium." In a hauntingly beautiful final stanza of 'Pike,' Hughes weaves together what may be called his trademark themes: poeticism, animal (totem), subconscious dreamscape, and death. Hughes writes:

Owls hushing the floating woods
Frail on my ear against the dream
Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
That rose slowly towards me, watching.
(Pike, Final Stanza)

The "Owls" signify Hughes' animal/shamanic stance. "Frail on my ear against the dream" and the dream rising "slowly towards me, watching" mark his interest in invisible, supra natural forces, or multi-dimensional Other, that closely watches over Hughes and over human concerns.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Gifford and Roberts write that, "According to Mircea Eliade, one of the functions of the shaman is to 'contribute decisively to the *knowledge of death*.'" Death is one of several aspects Hughes was interested in exploring within his work. His poetry contributed to the "knowledge of death" because he approached it through from a new and different angle; that of a shaman. There seems to be an almost electrical sense of mystery, tension and cosmology in Hughes' approach to poetry. Underlying, and providing a foundation for his expressions, is his certitude that the universe is full of questions, wonder, and worthy of close analysis.

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