

Imagination as A Source of Poetic Inspiration: A Study of Ted Hughes' *The Thought Fox*

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Abstract:

The paper deals with the 'Imagination power' of the poet Ted Hughes who successfully wrote down a poem making us realize the power and importance of 'imagination' as major tool of a poet. Through the poem *The Thought Fox* Ted Hughes takes us through the intricacies of penning down a poem successfully.

Key Words: Imagination, thinking, dream and nature.

Ted Hughes (28 December 1918-28 October 1988) was born Edward James Hughes in a small Yorkshire town on the edge of the moors, only a few miles from where the famous Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne) had lived. His father, William, a carpenter, had been badly wounded in World War I during the Gallipoli landings. Hughes was the youngest of three children. His brother briefly became a gamekeeper; his sister, Olwyn, became an executor and literary agent for the estate of Sylvia Plath. When Hughes was seven, the family moved to a mining town in south Yorkshire called Mexborough. From the grammar school there, he won a scholarship to attend Cambridge University, and he went to Cambridge in 1951 after two years

of national service in the Royal Air Force. Having changed his major from English to archaeology and anthropology, he graduated in 1954.

Hughes then worked at a number of jobs, including teaching. Although he had been writing poetry from the age of fifteen, he wrote little at Cambridge and attempted to publish only locally at first. In 1956, he met Sylvia Plath, who was two years younger than he was in Cambridge on a Fulbright Fellowship. At the time of their meeting, she was already a published poet. She began to send his poems to magazines and also entered him for a competition in New York for a first volume of poetry. He won with *The Hawk in the Rain*, and through its publication, his name quickly became known.

Plath and Hughes were married within four months of meeting. He returned with her to the United States in 1957, where they earned their living by teaching and writing prolifically together. In 1959, they returned to London, Hughes having completed *Lupercal*, helped by a Guggenheim Fellowship. The next year, their daughter, Frieda, was born, and the year after that, they moved to Devon, in the southwest part of England. Soon after the birth of their second child, Nicholas, in 1962, the marriage collapsed. Plath returned to London and filed for divorce, but during a bitterly cold winter she fell into a deep depression and committed suicide on February 11, 1963.

For some time after Plath's suicide, Hughes wrote only for children. In March, 1969, his new partner, Assia Wevill, and her child Shura both died tragically. Hughes dedicated *Crow*, a volume that marked a new direction in his poetry, to them. The volume also solidified his reputation as a writer and poet.

In 1970, he married Carol Orchard, the daughter of a Devon farmer whose farm he was leasing. *Moortown* includes many details about his experiences there and shows Hughes returning somewhat to the subject matter of his earlier poetry. Controversy over his relationship with Plath continued to dog him, especially in the United States, where his reputation was badly affected. He remained silent about the affair until the publication of *Birthday Letters* in 1997. Only after his death was the publication of Plath's journals allowed by their daughter, Frieda.

Hughes's first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), attracted considerable critical acclaim. In 1959 he won the Galbraith prize which brought \$5,000. His most significant work is perhaps *Crow* (1970), which whilst it has been widely praised also divided critics, combining an apocalyptic, bitter, cynical and surreal view of the universe with what sometimes appeared simple, childlike verse. *Crow* was edited several times across Hughes' career. Within its opus he created a cosmology of the totemic Crow who was simultaneously God, Nature and Hughes' alter ego. The publication of *Crow* shaped Hughes' poetic career as distinct from other forms of English Nature Poetry.

In a 1971 interview with *The London Magazine*, Hughes cited his main influences as including Blake, Donne, Hopkins and Eliot. He mentioned also Schopenhauer, Robert Graves' book *The White Goddess* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Hughes worked for 10 years on a prose poem, "Gaudete", which he hoped to have made into a film. It tells the story of the vicar of an English village who is carried off by elemental spirits, and replaced in the village by his enantiodromic double, a changeling, fashioned from a log, who nevertheless has the same memories as the original vicar. The double is a force of nature who organises the women of the village into a "love coven" in order that he may father a

new messiah. When the male members of the community discover what is going on, they murder him. The epilogue consists of a series of lyrics spoken by the restored priest in praise of a nature goddess, inspired by Robert Graves's *White Goddess*. It was printed in 1977.

In addition to his own poetry, Hughes wrote a number of translations of European plays, mainly classical ones. His *Tales From Ovid* (1997) contains a selection of free verse translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He also wrote both poetry and prose for children, one of his most successful books being *The Iron Man*, written to comfort his children after Sylvia Plath's suicide. It later became the basis of Pete Townshend's *Rock Opera* of the same name, and of the animated film *The Iron Giant*.

Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate in 1984 following the death of John Betjeman. Hughes served in this position until his death in 1998. In 1992 Hughes published *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, a monumental work inspired by Graves's *The White Goddess*. Also in 1992, Hughes published *Rain Charm for the Duchy*, collecting together for the first time his Laureate works, including poems celebrating important royal occasions. The book also contained a section of notes throwing light on the context and genesis of each poem. In 1998, his *Tales from Ovid* won the *Whitbread Book of the Year Award*. In *Birthday Letters*, his last collection, Hughes broke his silence on Plath, detailing aspects of their life together and his own behaviour at the time. The book, the cover artwork for which was by their daughter *Frieda*, won the 1999 *Whitbread Prize* for poetry.

The poem, *The Thought-Fox* (1957) one of the poems of his collection *The Hawk in the Rain*, depicts the state of a poet who is trying his best to pen down a poem. The poem showcases the nuances of penning down a poem through the narration of the poet's mind. It requires a lot of

patience, perseverance, series of thinking process which should come automatically and above all the power of imagination which is considered to be the pivotal characteristic of a poet.

The Poet is in his room during midnight and is thinking of writing a poem by imagining the activities going on in a forest. He is going deeper into his thoughts where he could feel the presence of someone else apart from him in that room. Poet has started to imagine the presence of an unknown acquaintance besides the clock which is the only object producing sound and breaking the loneliness. We should not be perturbed as a reader that something is going to haunt us. Instead we should understand as a reader that it is the poet's imagination and train of thoughts which is helping him to write a poem:

Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.

The poet is alone in his room and continue to think about the presence of someone. He is so engrossed in his thoughts that he is not able to see the stars in the sky which are the only shining objects in the darkness. Rather, he is able to feel someone's presence in his mind. Poet depicts here the word 'darkness' not to portray the negative aspect of his mind but to highlight the calm state of his mind. Because of his calmness he is able to imagine clearly and form an image of 'someone'. Loneliness is playing a great role in nurturing the poem which a writer is trying to aim for. Had he been not lonely he would have not been able to come to any kind of conclusion. When we think deeply about something, we tend to move away from all the hustle and bustle of our lives and this helps us to arrive at the proper conclusion:

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness

All the aforementioned ‘tools’ have helped the poet to draw an image of fox which poet was trying to essay when he asserted that he is not alone in his room. Imagination of the poet is such that he made his reader to accept that fox is there in his room which is not the case. Poet is making his readers believe the physical presence of fox by detailing about the nose, eyes, and the way fox walks:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

The Poet is trying to inform us that he could see the habitat of fox by depicting the footprints in the snow, across the snowy lanes full of trees. He is successful in depicting and making the readers believe about the exact detail of fox just by his power of imagination. By the power of imagination, I mean that we are completely lured towards his skill so much that we have also started to imagine the presence of the fox in his room. We as a reader have simultaneously started to think the way poet aspire us to think. Poet talks about the eyes of the fox and is mesmerized by his presence:

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
Across clearing, an eye
A widening deepening greenness

Poet is able to complete his poem and at the same time lucidly explain his readers about all the aspects of the fox. He is still sitting in his room. The things and the condition of the same are in the same state but we feel as a reader that we have woken up just now after a deep slumber. Poet gives his readers a trip to the forest during midnight. While in the forest he came to face fox and thereafter tells us about the different aspects of fox, viz, physical appearance, his

habitat etc. When we sit back and think about the trip to the forest we realize the power of imagination of the poet. Ted Hughes, who without forcing us took us on board on this amazing trip.

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