The Image of the Dragon in Selected Poems of Ted Hughes

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INTRODUCTION
Ted Hughes, one of the giants of 20th century British poetry, was born in Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire in 1930. After a stint in the Royal Air Force, Hughes attended Cambridge, where he studied archaeology and anthropology, taking a special interest in myths and legends. His initial volumes of verse contain poetic vignettes on the nature of the created world, focusing on particular animals, plants, people, and seasons. These poems were intended as explorations of identity, of the “thing in itself”— of each created being. Hughes’s poetry signaled a radical departure from the prevailing modes of his time. The conventional poem of the time rarely risked much; the content was rather mild in style. In contrast, Hughes employed a uniquely distinct language to explore themes which were mythic and elemental. The rural landscape of Hughes’s youth in Yorkshire exerted a lasting influence on his work. To read Hughes’ poetry is to enter a world dominated by nature, especially by animals. Hughes once confessed that he 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. He wanted to observe the fox-ness of the fox and the crow-ness of the crow. Using figures such as ‘Crow’ to approximate a mythic everyman, Hughes’s work speaks to his concern with poetry’s shamanic powers. Hughes often revealed a kind of autochthonous, yet literary, English language. While possessing the bodies of creatures, mostly male, Hughes climbed down the evolutionary chain. He delved intensely into the oddities of
language, which reeked of the jungle. Hughes’ imagery has strong Biblical allusions; in fact it is necessary to be familiar with many Biblical doctrines if one is to understand the poems from a deeper perspective. There is a striking resemblance of the animal protagonists of these poems of Hughes- ‘The Harvest Moon’, ‘Theology’, ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’, ‘Crow’s Fall’, ‘Lineage’ and ‘Hawk Roosting’, with the image of the Dragon (the Devil) presented in the Bible. Ted Hughes characteristically likes to take the place of the Dragon in the persona, and more often than not, he advocates the cause and nature of the Dragon very subtly in these poems.

The Dragon

‘He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, which is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.’

- Revelation, Chapter 20, the Holy Bible

The Dragon as mentioned in the Bible is none other than Satan himself. The Dragon is an inherently evil personage (a spirit) whose main ambition is to gain complete control over the earthly and heavenly realms. The Dragon was cast away from heaven when he desired to usurp God’s throne and authority. From that time through creation and till now he is consigned to his earthly abode and the air above for this unforgivable sin. The Dragon or the Devil is an evil spirit with unfathomable pride, a pride that overrides all qualities of benevolence, meekness, love and moral purity.

‘And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?’ (Rev.13, V.4)

The Harvest Moon

In this poem, Ted Hughes alludes to the pagan practices of worshipping under green trees in the high hills, something which was strictly forbidden in Christian doctrines. The moon also had a lot to do with pagan worship. In such acts of worship, the dark forces were invoked to do the bidding of the worshipper, whose evil desires could be satiated without any remorse. In fact, this kind of worship was shamanic and passed down from generation to generation. The worshippers as mentioned in this poem are petrified because of the fate that awaits the pagan devotees at the end of times, which is the apocalyptic destruction in the lake of fire where even rocks and mountains would be melted.
So they go out where elms and oak trees keep
A kneeling vigil, in a religious hush. (lines 10-11, The Harvest Moon)

In the Bible, there is the mention of the reaper coming for the final harvest where the useless tares are thrown into the fire and the wheat stalks are gathered for a heavenly and sacred purpose. And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; (Revelation 6.12)

The reaper is the anti-pagan Christ whose coming heralds the end of the world.

So people can’t sleep,

So they go out where elms and oak trees keep (lines 9-10, The Harvest Moon)

In the lines mentioned above, it is suggested that evil is natural and that the dragon-induced evil is but inevitable to the nature of man, a completely flawed being. The Dragon isn’t explicitly mentioned here but the image looms over the entire poem because those are the qualities of the Dragon. It is a sign of rebellion, a choice of pagan doom as better than Christian salvation.

Filling heaven, as if red hot, and sailing
Closer and closer like the end of the world. (lines 15-16, The Harvest Moon)

This illustrates the fact that destruction is coming and it is welcomed with a sense of anticipation because the pagan folk cannot run away from their original nature which is shamanic, evil and self-destructive. This again is what the dragon would desire. The people want to perish along with the mountains that melt in the sight of Christ’s fury.

Theology

"No, the serpent did not
Seduce Eve to the apple.
..... corruption of facts." (lines 1-4, Theology)

In this poem written by Hughes, there is a clearly discernible anti-Christian tone that pervades the entire text. The persona takes sides with the serpent who is none other than the spirit of the Dragon. It is an inversion of the Biblical story of creation. The serpent is portrayed as an innocent bystander who is caught in the ‘course of things’. The poem starts with a startlingly prosaic statement where the persona sets the tone at the outset itself and makes no attempt to camouflage his intentions.
“Adam ate the apple.
Eve ate Adam.
The serpent ate Eve.” (lines 5-7, Theology)

Now, this is a clearly a systematic inversion of the Bible verses mentioned in the book of Genesis as shown below.

“For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall
be as gods, knowing good and evil.
And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes,
and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also
unto her husband with her; and he did eat.” (V.5-6 Genesis, Bible)

Since the serpent tempted and seduced Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, the sin of seduction started with the serpent taking the initiative. The poem also makes mention of the word ‘dark intestine’; this could mean that this act of eating the forbidden fruit is merely a reflection of the undeniable hold of the fleshly nature of mortals which is again portrayed as being diabolically devilish in the Bible.

‘The serpent, meanwhile,
Sleeps his meal off in Paradise -
Smiling to hear
God’s querulous calling.’ (lines 9-12, Theology)

In the final stanza mentioned above, we find that the serpent’s actions are justified with those of the mortals, Adam and Eve which is the basic desire to eat whatever is tasty. But then, the serpent is suddenly identified with the ‘dark intestine’.

‘The serpent ate Eve.
This is the dark intestine.’ (lines 7-8, Theology)

And so, the image is that of a harmlessly pleasurable activity, which the act of eating a tasty fruit is. How could God or any divinity read something horribly wrong into such an innocent act? This is precisely the question that the persona raises in the poem. The serpent (the Dragon) is inherently evil, ambitious and self-glory compulsive because that’s his nature. This is typically suggestive of the Dragon’s
train of thought. He cannot be punished for what he does because he was predestined to do that, according to the persona.

**Lineage**

The poem *Lineage* is an anti-Christian inversion of the creation process mentioned in the bible.

The first line ‘*In the beginning was Scream*’ indicates that the origin of mankind was not something serene or beautiful. It was initiated by an angry god who inadvertently created bloodshed through the first murder recorded in the bible, the murder of Abel by Cain his brother.

*In the beginning was Scream*

Who begat Blood

Who begat Eye

Who begat Fear (lines 1-4, Lineage)

Fear, desire and anger are closely related which is why Cain killed Abel. Cain had a fear that god did not approve of his sacrifices which then led to anger on his part. According to the persona, the strict code of God which necessitated abstention from anything to do with the tree of life led to a desire psychosis which consequently culminated in the form of fear after the act was committed. The Eye refers to the angry overseeing god whose glance encompassed the garden of Eden. ‘Blood’ also means that man was born with blood flowing in his veins.

Who begat Mary

Who begat God

Who begat Nothing (lines 12-14, Lineage)

Here it says that Mary gave birth to Christ who really didn’t bring anything credible or noteworthy into the world. So this is a Dragon-like statement which is totally rebellious and satanic in its meaning as well as tone. When ‘Nothing’ begat Crow, the meaning takes a more sinister shade. Crow represents the Devil himself and his supposedly evil nature (supposedly in the persona’s eyes) and the creator is God himself. The Dragon is confined to earth in a cursed form searching for cursed food in a cursed manner as mentioned below.

Who begat Crow

*Screaming for Blood*

Grubs, crusts
 Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth (lines 17-21, Lineage)

Crow's Nerve Fails

In this poem, the persona focuses on one of creation’s ugliest and misunderstood creatures, the Crow. This bird’s black and pathetic appearance gives the observer the impression that it is a cursed creature and also a scavenger bird. The persona then equates it by describing it as being cursed to its earthly abode after a spiritually damning skirmish in the heavenly realm. This would mean that the Crow represents Lucifer, the Dragon who has been cast out from heaven for his intolerable pride and ambition. According to the Bible, there is no forgiveness or redemption for the Devil because there was nobody to tempt him. His nature was inherently evil but according to the persona, the inherently evil nature is not to be condemned.

Is he the archive of their accusations?
Or their ghostly purpose, their pining vengeance?
Or their unforgiven prisoner?
He cannot be forgiven. (lines 8-11, Crow's Nerve Fails)

From the explanation of the above mentioned verses it is obvious that the Crow-ness of the Crow is synonymous with the Devilish-ness of the Devil which gain translates into the Dragon-ness of the Dragon.

His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction,
..... heavily he flies. (lines 11-14, Crow's Nerve Fails)

Traditional meanings associate the Crow with bad omen, death, and dark witchcraft. Because of its affinity with life mysteries and magic, the crow is seen in many shamanic traditions as the spirit animal of choice for those who use magic and have the power to manipulate the law of the physical universe. The Crow used to be the animal of choice of shamans, who do witchcraft and shape-shifting.

Crow's Fall

When Crow was white he decided the sun was too white.
He decided it glared much too whitely.
He decided to attack it and defeat it. (lines 1-3, Crow's Fall)

The lines mentioned above are from Ted Hughes’ poem Crow's Fall. The verses
suggest that pure evil cannot withstand purity of thought, action or deed which is
typical of God. Evil without any adulteration of goodness or morality can only be
personified in Satan or in other words, the Dragon. Black morality needs to flood the
landscape of white morality with dark deeds and so it cannot but indulge in such acts.

He got his strength up flush and in full glitter.
He clawed and fluffed his rage up.
He aimed his beak direct at the sun's centre.

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congregation."

4, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds."

5, "I will be like the most high." (Isaiah Chap.14, V.13,14)

God had made him an exalted angel, but Satan wanted to be exalted even more. He was not content to shine as the ‘morning star’; he wanted to shine as the star of stars--with a brilliance that would outshine all the other stars even as the sun’s brightness makes all the other stars fade away so that they cannot be discerned in daylight. This explains Crow’s opinion about the sun being too bright. He wanted to outshine the sun which in the poem symbolizes God. His venture ends in defeat because it is mentioned in the poem that the sun brightened and that Crow (the Dragon) returned to the earth ‘charred black’.

Hawk Roosting

Counted as one of his well known poems, this masterpiece describes the enormity of pride along with the megalomaniacal disposition of the Dragon which is presented in the form of the Hawk.

And the earth’s face upward for my inspection. ((line 8, Hawk Roosting)

This line is indicative of the sheer megalomaniacal mindset of the Hawk. According to the persona the earth’s face is always available for the Hawk’s inspection. This would certainly mean the subordinate nature of the rest of creation under it. The earth is certainly the playground of the Dragon according to the Bible. The Dragon is the deceiver of people in high places and he thwarts acts of goodness and peace wherever possible because the Dragon desires the total subordination of humans. This aspect is evident in the lines mentioned below.

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot
Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
I kill where I please because it is all mine. ((lines 10-14, Hawk Roosting)

In short, the earth and its inhabitants are the killing fields of the Dragon.

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this. ((lines 21-24, Hawk Roosting)
The verses mentioned above are a grim reminder of the nature of the Dragon and his unwavering desire, which is to kill, to deceive and to possess the world forever. It is no doubt, a very flawed notion that reflects the overinflated ego of the Dragon himself. The Sun must be behind him (The Dragon) because he desires to be first, to be revered even more. Things are going to be kept like this because the evil presented by the Hawk is constant and shows no sign of abatement at any point in time.

**CONCLUSION**

Ted Hughes presents the reader with the animalistic course of things which is anarchic and totally self-seeking. This again is a guise for furthering the cause of the Dragon and his Dragon-ness in birds, animals and the jungle. According to the persona, in all the verses mentioned above, evil is meant to be understood separately and precisely in isolation from extraneous factors. Morality cannot rear its ugly head in these natural processes because that would be tantamount to destroying the individuality of things however terrible they may be.

It also seems to be a case of the observer not blending into the observed because the Dragon doesn’t want to possess the godly qualities of kindness, love, charity, meekness and patience. He wants to create a new world order through which the order of the observed is overthrown and trampled. The observer and the observed can blend only if their qualities are identical. This cannot happen with the Dragon because his doctrine of tyrannical pride is the very opposite of Love, which is God himself.