

# Theme of War and Violence in Ted Hughes' Poetry

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## Abstract

*Ted Hughes occupies a prominent and towering place among the British poets who contributed a great deal to the development to British poetry. There is no doubt in denying the fact that he deals with the theme of war and violence through animal world as is the case with Rudyard Kipling and D.H.Lawrence who have used animal imagery in their fictional and poetical works in a very vivid manner, but all these ,including Ted Hughes, indirectly co-relate these imagery to the man's world.*

## PAPER

The poetry of Ted Hughes is a distinctive imaginative world where the energy and sovereignty of human nature are explored in terms of the myths and symbols in a new syndrome. Hughes believes that there is an elemental power circuit of universe which, when distributed, leads to more power. Once this power is unleashed, it can neither be controlled nor it can be accepted because this acceptance, according to Ted Hughes, is an artistic exploration and expression of the theme of violence and death which the poet comprehends through the world of animals as well as of human beings including the war.

However, Hughes' treatment and attitude towards the animals and birds differ from that of Kipling and D.H.Lawrence because Ted Hughes makes a psychological and metaphoric use of these animals along with their attendant qualities. This is based on Hughes' belief in the predatory and primitive nature of the animals and their world which, at the psycho-spiritual level, even qualifies this world of man. As a result of this, Ted Hughes is also called a poet of violence and destruction because man has been alienated from God and Nature which are his guiding and controlling power.

In other words, because of the sweeping disharmony and disequilibrium, the energy and the power of man and nature have become orphaned and even unregulated due to which there is violence and chaos obtaining and howling all around in the contemporary society. It is because of Ted Hughes's opinion that man in the contemporary society lacks balance and harmony with life and, as a result of that, his energy has become more violent, war oriented and hence, more destructive. That is why, David Daiches rightly sums up the central thematic concern of Hughes' poetry as "a powerful poetic illustration of as a poet of animals, human nature and violence as an inevitable extension of the terrific ferocity."<sup>1</sup>

So, the whole poetic endeavour of Ted Hughes' poetry is not to define or discuss the animal

world and the human world in their respective absence or presence of the fierce energy and prelapsarian purity, but to achieve a LEVEL OF BEING where both become the part of central consciousness which speaks of their essential oneness.

That is why, in his poem, *Jaguar*, Ted Hughes does not depict Jaguar merely as an animal, but also a representative of the primitive and wild human nature where its imprisonment is as violent as its freedom is dangerous. With the help of a few revealing and graphic images and rhythmic alliterations, the poet seems to suggest that the zoo is a prison where the animals are condemned to solitary confinement for their being non-human, but man cannot cage in or confine these animals' instincts and the energy symbolized by Jaguar, and this is what the poet means when he says:

*The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel*

*Over the cage floor the horizon come*

In this way, Ted Hughes makes a powerful poetic illustration of human violence translated in terms of either the human violence as is exemplified in the poem, *Thrushes*, and *Bayont Charge*. His poem, *Thrushes* symbolizes the terrific ferocity and the lightening quickness which Ted Hughes finds absent or missing from the human world. The spontaneous agility and the balanced efficiency of the bird is conveyed through a pattern of merely half-sentence with three words-a start, A bounce, a stab etc. This is what Aiden Wasley says: "Ted Hughes has metaphorically expressed the world of animals in terms of men to express the theme of war

and violence."2 Their life is not obstructed or delayed by the indolent sighs and yawning stares, rather with a single minded automatic and triggered body; these birds attack their prey like the Shark devouring itself without second thought, but the heroism and the intellectual agility of man fly in the opposite direction, and his right hand does not know what his left hand is doing.

This is what is illustrated in the poem, *The Hawk in the Rain* as well, where the Hawk remains undisturbed and unaffected by the persistent onslaught of the rain and keep sitting on the tree, whereas man is completely trapped and drowned in the marsh as the poet also remarks:

*I drown in the drummy plough land, I dredge up  
Hell after hell from the swallowing of the earth's mouth  
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle*

The animal instinct of man in the war makes the concept of heroism and humour as false, and the only concern before him is to survive. As a result of this, his rifle is numbed like a damaged arm, and the patriotic tears change in to molten iron, and he is hung like a statuary in the midstride as the poet also expresses in *Bayont Charge*:

*King, honour, human dignity, etc.  
Dropped like luxuries in a yellow alarm  
To get out of that blue crackling air  
His terror touching dynamite*

In this way, with the help of a scene of battle and the terrified soldiers, the poet explores a bewildered state of mind which is expressed realistically through his reaction to danger and his only desire to survive. This theme of war, violence and death continue ever in the later mature poetry of Ted Hughes, where the poet talks of human life which is no more alive than the celluloid smile as is beautifully expressed in the poem, *Six Young Men*, in which the real theme is not war, but violence in terms of death and grief, and here war is not only an occasion rather the subject matter of the poem.

The poem also depicts beautifully the premature death of six young men who had joined the army during the war time and got themselves photographed which speaks of their happiness and optimism, but just six months later when they had been photographed, all of the six were dead in the course of war. Albeit, the geographical and physical background of the valley has not been changed as the poet says himself:

*And still that valley has not changed its sound  
Though their faces are four decade under the  
ground*

Thus, the poem beautifully juxtaposes the destructibility of war with the undestructibility of the single exposure of the celluloid of photograph, and comes to the conclusion:

*That man is not more alive whom you confront  
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear, speak loud  
Than any these six celluloid smiles are*

As Richard Hoggart also puts it, "Ted Hughes has powerfully explored the destruction caused by war as well as the violence associated with it."<sup>3</sup>In this way, after making a hurried survey of Ted Hughes' poetry, we can safely and rightly aver that it is rightfully right to conclude that the themes of war, violence and death constitutes the main thrust of Ted Hughes' poetry because his poetry is primarily concerned with the relationship between the human minds and the forces that govern man's material existence.

#### REFERENCES:

1. David Daiches, *Ted Hughes and his World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous) P.45
2. Aidan Wasley, "Ted Hughes and the British Literary World", in Sharpe, Ted Hughes in Context, p.87
3. Richard Hoggart (1951). Ted Hughes A:n Introductory Essay. London: Chatto & Windus. p. 219