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Abstract

Ted Hughes, unlike some modern poets, is profoundly concerned with the subject matter of his poetry. War and Violence are dominant themes in the poetry of Ted Hughes. The poet is fascinated by all kinds of violence— violence in love as well as in hatred, violence in the jungle, violence in a battle and violence in the form of murder and sudden death. His description of war and violence is very vivid and effective. There are many of Ted Hughes's poems in which the theme of war and violence find a vivid expression. The Jaguar; Second Glance at a Jaguar; Pike; Hawk Roosting; View of a Pig; Esther's Tomcat; Cat and Mouse; Thrushes, Six Young Men, The Casualty, Out, Grief for Dead Soldiers, The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar and Bayonet Change, are his prominent poems in which the cruelty, the fierceness and the violence which are inseparable from the world of Nature, have been depicted in a very decent manner.

Keywords

War, Violence, Violent, Wounded, Deaths, Poignant, Brutality, Calamity.

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Edward James Hughes, known as Ted Hughes, was a great English poet, dramatist, critic and short story writer, was born on August 17, 1930, in Mytholmroyd in the valley of one of England's first industrialized rivers, the Calder, in the Yorkshire Pennines. He became poet-laureate of England in 1984. War as a theme for the writing of poems fascinated Hughes and was quite an obsession with him. It was World War-I that made the most powerful impact on his mind. Hughes was a child of only four years when World War-I was almost nearing its end. His father had fought at Gallipoli in the course of World War-I and had narrowly escaped death. Hughes's father had been hit by an enemy bullet, but the bullet had failed to pierce his chest because he happened to have his paybook inside his breast pocket which absorbed the impact of the bullet. He was wounded critically and was admitted to a hospital. His survival was a miracle. He had to remain in the hospital for a long time and when he returned home after recovery, he developed a habit of describing his war experiences to anybody who cared to listen to him. Hughes at the age of four could not have understood much of what his father used to say, but the sheer repetitiveness of his father's accounts of the war made a deep impression upon the child's mind. Consequently, Hughes began to think of war only in terms of wounds, suffering, pain, admission to a hospital, convalescence, and so on. The net result of this was that Hughes did not regard war as something grand or something splendid. He did not treat war as an opportunity for the display of one's bravery and heroism. Therefore, in his poems, Hughes takes cognizance only of the dark and tragic aspects of war and violence. Resultantly, the poetry of Hughes is a reflection of personal and autobiographical experiences. Hughes's poetry, both at its best and worst, shows a preoccupation with war and violence. Hughes certainly seems to be endorsing the themes of war and violence in his poetry. Through his pictures of the ruthless predator nets of the thrushes, the hawk, and the pike, Hughes seems to say that there is no alternative to this violence. Hughes is very skillful in depicting his themes because the very style of his poems suits the subjects.

Keith Sagar has expressed his opinion that poetry should take risks because poetry is a "murderous art." According to this critic, the only English poet who fulfills this condition is Ted Hughes who seems to him to have broken new ground by dealing with the dark, psychic, violent forces latent in modern life. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his poetry is violence as a pure expression of spirit and violence as an assertion of identity. In this connection, the closing lines of the poem *Pike* are significant. The narrator's dream here is a dream of violence. This is not without a base because the English people have always been more aggressive

and war-like than they think, and the imperialism which our critic has talked about in connection with Hughes is really dear to the heart of England.

In Hughes's first volume of poems entitled *The Hawk in the Rain*, the war poems are, with the animal poems, the most deeply-felt pieces. In his view, war makes man live in the shadow of death where there is room only for essentials, and no room for trifles. The war poems in this volume include *Bayonet Charge* and *Six Young Men*. In the poem *Bayonet*, the fear of being killed in the fighting has been depicted in telling words and in an emphatic manner. This poem has certainly a lot to teach its readers. In times of war, a man recovers his animal instinct for survival. The poem states this idea dramatically in the very first sentence of the poem: 'Suddenly he awoke and was running'. The running soldier's mind is so deeply concentrated on his desire to survive that he has no time to think of the man-made abstract concepts which insult the reality they seek to express. This soldier has neither time nor the inclination to think of such concepts as king, honor, and human dignity, and yet these are the ideals for the sake of which soldiers are expected to sacrifice their lives. At a moment of danger, this soldier is in a state of panic, and his only thought is how to escape the danger and save his life. Thus the reality of death is understood or realized only by those who find themselves face-to-face with it.

The poem *Six Young Men* describes the premature deaths of a half a dozen young men who had joined the army in wartime. They had once got themselves photographed. Their group photograph, which figures prominently in the poem, and which, in fact, is the motivating force behind the poem, shows those young men dressed neatly for a Sunday picnic. The photograph shows them as a happy and optimistic group of friends ready to set out on an excursion. But six months after this photograph had been taken, all the six were dead. They had all died in the course of the war. The landscape, in the midst of which they had been photographed, has not changed since their deaths; but their absence from the scene is conspicuous. These men have been dead for the last forty years; and so the poet writes:

'And still, that valley has not changed its sound/Though their faces are four decades under the ground'.

The beautiful and precise description of the landscape is such that we begin to visualize ourselves in the position of those six young men. Hughes considers that those men are still alive in one sense. They are more alive than those persons with whom we might shake hands. The deaths of those six soldiers, though now a happening of the distant past, represent a greater reality than the living persons can ever imagine because there is 'no thought so vivid as their smoking blood.' The point of the poem is that the deaths of other men are a means where from we can

experience our own lives more intensely. He does not lament over the deaths of the young men in specific terms and the implied poignancy of their deaths does move his heart deeply. According to Hughes, those young men seem to be more alive and more real than those who are actually alive. This seems to be a glorification of death but he does not give any hint that he is glorifying death in the cause of his country. The glorification of death is linked only by the implication.

Grief for Dead Soldiers is his other poem which consists of three sections describing three different ways of looking at death and three kinds of grief. First, there is the official grief over the deaths of the soldiers who were killed in the course of a war. This grief is the “mightiest”; and this grief would certainly arouse patriotic feelings in the hearts of the civilian population. Secondly, there is the widow’s grief, or the grief of the woman whose husband had been killed in the course of the fighting. Hers is the “most secret” grief. She certainly feels diminished by the death of her husband because she cannot build her sorrow into a monument. The entire world has been shattered for her just as the body of her husband had been smashed in the firing. The third grief, which the poet describes as the “truest” grief, is experienced by those who have to bury the dead soldiers. Those who have to perform this task, are also soldiers; they were the comrades of those who have been killed. These surviving soldiers give vent to not dramatic tears: they simply accept death as a fact of everyday life. And yet there is profound and genuine grief in their hearts.

The Casualty is Hughes’s other poignant poem. It is an almost heart-rending poem but the poet had kept his own grief under the control, and we also accept the death of the airman in a stoical spirit. In this poem, war is reluctantly acknowledged by the civilian population who live ‘behind steamed windows’ and whose perspective is denied by ‘the washing hung out’. In a sleepy town in the English countryside, war comes like an invasion in the shape of a fighter airplane that has caught fire. Typically the animals on the ground are the first to acknowledge the burning aircraft which has dropped to the ground among the bushes and the shrubs outside the town. While the people continue to go about in their sluggish manner, a peasant is ‘craning every way in astonishment’; a hare “flattens ears, and tears madly away’, and ‘the wren warns.’ A man has fallen out of the air, alive like the mythological Icarus. Actually, the airman, who seemed to be alive while falling down from his airplane, is dead; and yet his corpse embodies more of physical reality than is possessed by the whole of the civilian population of the town put together:

‘The burned man Bulks closer greater flesh and blood than their own’.

It is the airman’s death that is acknowledged by the civilians who are also unable to grasp the significance of life. They merely:

Start to the edge
Of such horror close as mourners can,
Greedy to share all that is undergone,
Grimace, gasp, gesture of death.

As already mentioned above, the poet does not grow sentimental about death here or elsewhere. His war poems are not lachrymose; they merely reveal to us the reality of death and the significance of life. Dying in war may be a commendable act, but living is far more precious.

His other outstanding war poem bears the title *Out*. This poem is based on personal and autobiographical experiences. Hughes's father had fought in World War-I, and was one of the only seventeen survivors in his regiment. On one occasion his father narrowly escaped death when a piece of shrapnel, supposed to have penetrated his heart, was reflected by a paybook in his breast pocket. Ted Hughes was at that time only four years old. After this, the war, the casualness of death, and the arbitrariness of survival, which have vividly and painfully been depicted in the poem *Out* gripped his imagination. In part-I of this poem, Hughes recalls his father's experiences in the war, and says that it was his childish and imaginary participation in World War-I. Part II of this poem anticipates the birth of a dead man. It is an image of a generation of children born only to die. Hughes feels cheated by the war's destruction of his childhood, and he wants an end to the worship of death. This poem is a recollection of the horrors of World War-I and the experiences of his father which brooded over Hughes's childhood.

A noteworthy poem dealing with death, but not with death in any war, is *The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar*. This poem is about a Protestant clergyman who was burned to death by fanatical Roman Catholics. Hughes regards this death by burning as the "finest hour" of the man who lost his life on account of the religious bigotry of his opponents. In the eyes of the townspeople who witnessed this death, Bishop Farrar's fortitude while burning had a greater significance than all the sermons which he had delivered. The Bishop is a hero in Hughes's eyes also. We have the following beautiful and uplifting lines at the end:

Out of his eyes,
Out of his mouth, fire-like a glory broke,
And smoke burned his sermons into the skies

The first thing that strikes us about *The Jaguar* is the violence depicted therein. The Jaguar is depicted as 'hurrying enraged' through prison darkness. It does not feel boring at all. In fact, his eyes are blind because of the fire in them; and

his ear has become deaf because of *the bang of blood in the brain*. He spins from the bars, but they are not regarded by him as those of a cage. The ferocity of the Jaguar is conveyed to us by such words and phrases as ‘hurrying enraged’ and ‘the drills of his eyes on a short – fierce fuse’. Next to his fierceness, his chief trait is the feeling of freedom which finds expression in the extreme rapidity of his movements.

Hughes’s other poem ‘*Hawk Roosting*’ depicts violence and brutality. The imagery of violence and brutality in the poem is even more striking than the hawk’s egoism and his sense of power. The hawk is proud of its power to kill. The poet has summed up the fierceness and the brutality of the hawk in the following lines:

‘I kill where I please because it is all mine’.

The hawk’s whole business in life is ‘to tear off heads’. His whole concern is to distribute death; and he never wavers in carrying out this task because he knows only one path, and that is the path leading him directly through the bones of the living creatures. Thus *Hawk Roosting* is one of those poems which show Hughes’s interest in the violence and the brutality which are the rule, not the exception, in the world of Nature. Some critics have called his interest in violence and brutality as an obsession, but that is the wrong way of looking at these poems. Violence and brutality are just one of the many themes in the poetry of Hughes.

Thrushes is another poem that shows Hughes’s obsession with violence. A thrush is seemingly an innocent and gentle bird, but Hughes has observed a thrush more minutely than an ordinary man does. Hughes has observed a thrush’s swiftness and speed in attacking a prey and wrote this poem with the intention to depict that swiftness and speed. A thrush would show no mercy to a prey; and it would not delay its action even by a second.

Pike is an animal poem with the theme of violence and horror. Here the author has described the pike fish with its fierce and destructive nature since its very inception i.e. from the very time the mother fish lays its eggs. The pike-fish are so destructive by nature that they even kill one another to satisfy their hunger: ‘And indeed they spare nobody’.

Thistles focus on Hughes’s inclination to depict violence and cruelty in his poems. The last six lines of the poem embody brutality, cruelty and barbarity. Thistles have grown ‘from the underground stain of a decayed viking’; each of these plants has a plume of blood’ they all grow grey like men, and they are all killed like men fighting in a battle. Then their descendants appear, armed with weapons, fighting over the same ground. The poem presents a vivid picture of brutal violence and bloodthirstiness.

The ferocity of the Jaguar is retained in *The Second glance of a Jaguar*. The use of the word “gangster” for the jaguar points to the animal’s violent habits. The use of the phrase “the cain-brands” is also significant because this phrase also refers to the jaguar’s brutality and violent nature. The violent nature of the Jaguar is further emphasized when we are told that he flourished his tail ‘as if looking for a target’.

Despite the fact that there were charges of violence against Hughes, He emerges as a champion of pacifism in his poems written against the horrors of war. In the *Bayonet Charge*, *Grief for Dead Soldiers and Out* and *Six Young Men*, he shows the havoc that war causes. Particular in the *Grief for Dead Soldiers*, he presents the pictures of a war widow against the building of a memorial to the martyr in the war:

Still, she will carry cups from table to sink,
She cannot build her sorrow in
a monument,

And walk away from it. Closer than thinking

In *Crows Account of the Battle*, Hughes sardonically comments on the human belligerence and what comes of it:

There was this terrific battle.
The noise was as much
As the limits of possible noise could take.
There were screams higher groans deeper
Than any ear could hold.
Many eardrums burst and some walls
Collapsed to escape the noise.
Everything struggled on its way
Through this tearing deafness
As through a torrent in a dark cave.
The cartridges were banging off, as planned,
The fingers were keeping things going
According to excitement and orders.

In this poem, the Crow mentions the result of the Battle in the following lines:

...the survivors stayed.
And the earth and the sky stayed.
Everything took the blame.
Not a leaf flinched, nobody smiled

World War II had caused a great havoc, especially in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When Hughes came to know about the large-scale massacre of the Jews by the Nazis, his poetic mind could not help revolting against this man-made calamity. Ted Hughes felt that this was not the right attitude because one could not avoid the problem by simply shutting one's eyes to it. That is why Hughes depicts faithful and real pictures of the nightmare that the War had created and the vision of a nightmarish world it had left behind. This is how he recalled the experience of his childhood which he described in *Out*:

My father sat in his chair recovering
From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud,
Body buffeted worldless, enraged by long soaking
In the colors of mutilation.
His outer perforations
Were valiantly healed, but he and the hearth fire its blood-flicker
On biscuit bowl and piano and table leg,
Moved into strong and stronger possession
Of minute after minute, as the clock's tiny cog Laboured and on the thread
of his listening
Dragged him bodily from under
The mortised four-year strata of dead Englishmen
He belonged with.

Similarly, in *Six young men*, Hughes brings out the contrast between what these six young men in a holiday mood were like before the war, and what became of them during it:

This one was shot in an attack and lay
Calling in the wire, then this one, his best friend,
Went out to bring him in and was shot too;
And this one, the very moment he was warned
From potting at tin cans in no man's land,
Fell back dead with his rifle-shights shot away.
The rest nobody knows what they came to,
But come to the worst they must have done, and held
Closer than their hope; all were killed.

There is a vivid picture of the senselessness of war and the havoc it brings to young men. In *Grief for Dead Soldiers*, Hughes paints an ironically grandiloquent

picture of the unveiling of a cenotaph. But the real strength and point of the poem lie in its second section wherein the focus is on the widow of a soldier. Hughes, while avoiding the sentimentality and gaining the bitter poignancy, expresses her grief in the following manner:

The dead man hangs around her neck, but never
Close enough to be touched, or thanked even,
For being all that remains in a world smashed.

Hughes presents a very powerful and vivid description of the general horrors created by the World War in his *Crow's Account of the Battle* wherein he writes:

And when the smoke cleared it became clear
This had happened too often before
And was going to happen too often in future
And happened too easily
Bones were too like lath and twigs
Blood was too like water
Cries were too like silence
The most terrible grimaces too like footprints in the mud
And shooting somebody through the midriff
Was too like striking a match
Too like spotting a snooker ball
Too like tearing up a hill
Blasting the whole world to bits
Was too like slamming a door
Too like dropping in a chair
Exhausted with rage
Too like being blown to bits yourself
Which happened too easily
With too like no consequences.

Hughes shows a rare boldness in facing the situation and in expressing the horror that war had created. While the Movement poets were shutting their imaginations from this ugly reality, Hughes decided to face it. Many east European poets had fought in the war and lost their lives in this process. Hughes felt attracted to them. As far as Violence is concerned, to Hughes, it is an assertion of identity and a pure expression of spirit. Through his poems, he tries to give a message that there is no alternative to this violence in the nature. Indeed, war and violence are the

dominant themes in Hughes's poetry; and for this reason, he has often been regarded as a poet of violence, though he himself equated the word "violence" with what he called "vehement activity" or with what he also called "energy". However, we do not agree with the opinion that Hughes's habitual concern with violence is monotonous, or that it becomes some sort of handicap to Hughes in the writing of his poetry. In each one of the poems dealing with the theme of war or violence and depicting war or violence in one form or the other, Hughes shows himself to be a great and gifted maker of memorable images.

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