

*God tries to teach Crow to say LOVE: 'Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea'. (Crow's First Lesson)*

#### Background - where did the idea for 'Crow' come from?

In 1957 Ted Hughes met the American sculptor, engraver and publisher Leonard Baskin. Baskin was obsessed by corpses, and a variety of other things attended this obsession, including crows which he engraved with disturbingly anthropoid (human-like) characteristics. An invitation from Baskin to Hughes to write a few little poems to accompany his engravings was the cause of the first Crow poems. *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* was first published by Faber in 1972.

The poems included in *Crow* are part of a large number of poems which make up a 'vast folk epic' which tells the story of Crow. Hughes's account of the creation of the figure of Crow is thus:

God, having created the world, has a recurring nightmare. A huge hand/ voice comes from deep space, takes him by the throat, half-throttles him, drags him through space, ploughs the earth with him then throws him back into heaven in a cold sweat. Meanwhile man sits at the gates of heaven waiting for God to grant him audience. He has come to ask God to take life back. God is furious and sends him packing. The nightmare seems to be independent of the creation, and God cannot understand it. The nightmare is full of mockery of the creation, especially of man. God challenges the nightmare to do better. This is just what the nightmare has been waiting for. It plunges down to ferment and gestate in matter and a little embryo begins. This is how Crow was created. God tests Crow by putting him through a series of trials and ordeals which sometimes result in Crow being dismembered, transformed or obliterated, but Crow survives them all, little changed. Meanwhile Crow interferes in God's activities, sometimes trying to learn or help, sometimes in mischief, sometimes in open rebellion. It is perhaps his ambition to become a man, but he never quite makes it. (Ref: based on Hughes's spoken account of Crow's creation on the Faber/Penguin audiotape).

#### Who is Crow?

'Crow' not only reworks the biblical creation story as related in Genesis, but also comes complete with all the mythological and folk-lore associations which crows have gathered through their long existence. The 'Introduction' essay from Anne Skea's website relates this in detail. Not only is he a totem (emblem of a tribe) of Britain (Bran), he is also a 'trickster' figure common in the mythology and legends of North American Indians. This figure (like the fool and the jester) is a breaker of all taboos, a comic but disgraceful, outlawed but incorrigible being. He knows neither good nor evil but is responsible for both.

Hughes makes it clear that Crow has many characteristics in common with Man. Crow has anthropomorphic qualities, combined with the shabby, furtive, scavenging characteristics of a common crow, and also supernatural powers. These relate directly to the complex thematic structure of the collection.

### What is 'Crow' about?

Choosing a crow as the protagonist for these poems is no accident- the crow is the most intelligent of birds, kills a little himself, and as a carrion eater is dependent on the killing of others. It is first on the scene at many disasters. It is black all over and the largest and least musical of songbirds.

All these associations help Hughes not only to explore his own mind but the human mind in general. The death/ rebirth themes in Hughes's poetry runs through the whole collection, accompanied by themes such as the basic cruelty of natural life, violence, predation, man's guilt and man's relationship with nature and with God. Essentially, Crow is an Everyman figure who starts with nothing in his quest to learn how to live like man according to the laws of creation. He finds loneliness, natural cruelty, violence and indifference to his needs. Crow's widely improbable escapades deal with the big theological issues of man's place in the world as it is and the world as a loving God must have intended it. In its fusion of mythological influence the collection represents the cosmic absurdity of man's position in relation to himself and the universe when old truths and theological comforts have been ripped away. The tone is often bleak and nihilistic, often playfully ironic and blackly humorous, but always highly energised, smashing through personal psychology to offer a wider commentary (remember '*bulletins from the battleground within?*' Keith Sagar). But remember that Sagar also noted that 'Crow is Everyman who will not acknowledge that everything he most hates and fears -The Black Beast- is within him.'

### Form and Structure of 'Crow'

The poetry stands as something new and distinctly un-museum like, '*as it might be invented after the holocaust and demolition of all libraries*'.

*'The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that Crow would sing. In other words, songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and a super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other considerations and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing. I get near it in a few poems. (Hughes in London Magazine 1971)*

Much of the form and structure of 'Crow' has been influenced by more primitive poetry and song, especially in its use of parallelism, repetition and variation. It is the multiple heritage compounded of Biblical, Shakespearean, modernist and primitive elements rather than any single source which Hughes managed to reclaim in the little fables (a story with an animal as a character), visionary anecdotes (informal oral tale), apocryphal (not genuine) lectures and totem (emblem of a tribe) songs of Crow.

Earlier Hughes poetry has more regularity associated with traditional verse than later poems, at least in terms of stanza form. Since *Woodwo* Hughes has written in free verse, unaided by stanza, metre and rhyme, or as is often the case in 'Crow', punctuation. Sound still remains crucial to Hughes, so half-rhyme (which can provide an echoing effect), assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and cadence are all vital components, as is the play with vowel and consonant sounds. So if the songs of Crow aren't musical, their effect must come from their starkness and abrasiveness. The images are more intense than ever. The style of Crow is very much a purged style, distilling at times an amazing clarity. '*My idea was to reduce my style to the simplest clear cell-then regrow a wholeness and richness organically from that point*'. Crow was abandoned with Hughes scarcely beyond the first phase.

### *Crow Tyrannosaurus*

This is one of the best Crow poems- the title refers to a bipedal (two legged) flesh-eating dinosaur, which links the killing in the poem to primordial origins. The poem starts with a cacophony of wailing voices, like those at a funeral. The swift, the cat and the dog are gorged with their kills, *pulsating, writhing and bulging* with death. 'Even man he was a walking/ Abattoir/Of innocents.' We too are locked into this cycle of life through death, and killing, although the moral implications of this aren't further explored. The repetition of 'Alas' shows the Crow's mounting fear, panic and regret at what his nature expects of him, to kill, and the word 'ought' signals the first time in the collection that the Crow seems to develop a conscience. 'But' signals he can't get past the horror of creation, he is locked into a nightmarish world by the primordial mechanism which makes his 'trapsprung' head jerk to each grub. Note the repetition of the hard 'a' sound, giving a sense of violence. Weeping for his victims, he stabs and kills them. The inability to escape from this process, and the necessity of killing, has made the Crow impervious to pleas of clemency through grounds of expediency. This, to me, is horrific. Every point of the Crow's, and therefore of man's life, is the death of someone else's. What about free will and choice?

### *Crow's Account of the Battle*

Here Crow is given another lesson by the reality he encounters. Crow tells the story of a battle it has witnessed, relating in the first stanza the horrific noise of it all. The second stanza describes the effects of war on man- reality is a 'mishmash of scripture and physics' (scripture providing the motive and physics the scientific-technological means for killing). People wept, or sat, or lay, but it becomes clear in the fourth stanza that this battle would soon happen again. In a list of similes the reasons for this are given- the juxtaposition of violence with everyday actions seems to suggest that we are too complacent or lazy or familiar with violence to do anything about it. War, in this version of reality, seems inevitable- everyone blows someone else to bits or is blown to bits themselves with no consequences or moral compulsion to do otherwise. 'Everything took the blame' means in fact, that no-one in particular is to blame, or sees themselves as responsible. After the storm of battle, comes a smile-less silence, for now. A leaf dare not flinch. If these laws are 'Universal' and accepted by everyone, then Crow is coming to feel a genuine outrage.

### *Crow's Elephant Totem Song*

In this poem the Crow speaks of how the elephant loses his innocent existence and has to reinvent himself in order to survive in a world of violence and predation. The poem begins in a folktale fashion- 'Once upon a time'. The delicate, small elephant with eyes of innocence and kindness is contrasted with the hyenas' grinning expressions 'like the half-rotted stumps of amputations'. Notice again how the imagery of dismemberment is used to signal an exploration of the self or of a wider, fragmented reality. They grew enraged at the elephant, who, not being God, was unable to correct their ways. The vegetarian elephant was able to bask in his own ease, but each hyena was locked into his own carnivorous hell. The desire to kill was too great, and the world of their senses and desires came to the fore. The elephant is resurrected massive and toothproof, his innocence now changed through experience to knowing wisdom. He stands apart from the frenzied, fevered life of the five senses by becoming sufficiently thick-skinned and insulated against the pressures of the outside world. He is able to create and live in terms of

## 'From the Life and Songs of the Crow' by Ted Hughes

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an inner world which death and pain cannot penetrate. No astronomer can find the star the elephant sings of because it exists only in inner space. Thematically this poem is interesting because although the elephant can no longer live outside the cycle of predation that the hyenas laughingly vomit forth their acknowledgement of, it still retains a sense of strength and dignity by seeking solace in itself, singing mournfully deep in the forest-maze. A great sense of pathos is built in this poem, as the elephant is a symbol for man's lost innocence and the necessity for inuring oneself against violence and pain in the reality of the world we live in which is far removed from the innocence of Eden.

### *Crow Blacker than Ever*

Here Crow is described in the third person, intervening in the feud between man and God at the point of creation. Things looked like they were going to fall apart, but Crow intervened nailing heaven and earth, God and man together. But this joint became gangrenous, and the horror and agony beyond redemption and undiminished, because man cannot be man and live in this world when his spirit strains towards heaven (a world without darkness, suffering and death), and God cannot be God for he must share the sufferings of this world. Only Crow is whole, absolute, content, 'Flying the black flag of himself'. Even though he grins at his trickster's intervention in this creation, the important thematic point of this poem is that he did make an effort for mankind to live a life of fulfilment of sorts, not polarisation between heaven and earth. With overtones of the Crucifixion story, what is this world that is so far from what a loving God intended it to be, and so far from heaven that the joint is like rotten flesh? If Crow is blacker than ever, what does this symbolise about the relationship between man and God? Is our union artificial; are our differences irreconcilable? For Hughes, Christianity was just another myth and the poem in part explores its inadequacy in reconciling man and God.

### References

The above notes have been informed by many critical interpretations of Hughes's work, and represent, at least in part, a distillation of others' ideas into a format accessible for AS Literature students. These notes are drawn from my own interpretation of Hughes's work, but often through the critical lens of Keith Sagar's 'The Art of Ted Hughes's (Second Ed. 1975) in particular. Ann Skea's online essay about the Crow poems is also a useful resource:  
[www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/](http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/)

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