



A Literature Review on Ted Hughes' Poetry

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Abstract

Ted Hughes is one of the most representative poets in contemporary Britain. He is named as the "animal poet" for he is good at using animals as materials for poetry creation. Although researchers and scholars at home and abroad have done abundant studies on Hughes and his works, most of them probe Hughes' poetry on animal images, ecologism, violence and Taoism. This article aims to give a comprehensive analysis of Ted Hughes' poetry.

Key words: Ted Hughes; Literature review; Poetry

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is a distinguished laurel poet, together with Philip Larkin, he was recognized as the two most important poets in Britain after World War II. In the first half of the 20th century, the English poetry was in the leading position in world literature. Hughes wrote extensively throughout his life, writing novels, poetry, and drama. The most excellent contribution Hughes makes for the literary world remains his unique and challenging poetic touch upon animal images. Ted Hughes has always been the focus of the scholars and literary critics all over the world ever since the publication of his great poem *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957. Researchers and scholars at home and abroad have done plentiful studies on Hughes

and his works, and most critics regard him as a great poet who writes poetry aiming at exploring violence, depicting animal images for adults. Animal's territory is the favorite Hughes to write upon. He aims to give a moral lesson through animal imagery. Hawk, crow, fox, jaguar, cat, mouse, bull, pig etc. are frequently depicted in his poems. In summary, no poets have observed and used animals in poetry more truthfully and accurately than Ted Hughes. Hughes also used poems to describe the nature and expressed his dissatisfaction and hidden worries about human society through the longing for the beautiful nature. Throughout these research results, we know that the experts from overseas began earlier than those in domestic and also the study scope is more widely than domestic ones, and the connotation is more far-reaching.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON TED HUGHES ABROAD

There are four periods about Ted Hughes' study. The first period is the 1970s. Keith Sagar's *Ted Hughes* (1972) is the first book which focuses on Hughes' biography. Though brief, it is beneficial and referential for the later researchers. The later researchers P. E. Strauss's *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* (1972) was published the same year. In this article, Strauss defines Ted Hughes as a Metaphysical Poet and compares him with William Blake. Meanwhile, Strauss mentions that as a poet of New Age, Ted Hughes has his unique writing style and his poetry has its specific meaning. Then in 1975 Keith Sagar's another book *The Art of Ted Hughes* makes specific comments on Hughes' poetry for the first time. In this study of Ted Hughes, Dr Sagar gives most of his attention to individual poems, their meaning and coherence, their relation to each other and to the poetic tradition, their sources and background (often in mythology and folklore), and their relevance to living in our time.

The next period is the 1980s. Ekbert Faas's *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (1980) appends an excellent bibliography and two long interviews he conducted with Hughes and a number of valuable excerpts from Hughes' critical writings, as well as Faas's own account of the poet's life and work. It has since become a fruitful point of entry for those wishing to be initiated into Hughes' later poetry. Stuart Hirschberg analyzes the myth pedigrees in Hughes' poetry in his *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes* (1981) to show the influence of foreign myth and to expose how this kind of myth is reflected on his poetry. *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (1983) by Keith Sagar reveals mythological elements in his collections of poems such as *Wodwo*, *The Crow* and *The Cave Birds*. The first book of criticism ever to approach Hughes' work with a complexity commensurate with the poet's own is *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination* by Leonard M. Scigaj (1986). This book explores Hughes' Asian influences, and how he has sought to augment the modern Western consciousness. The book divides Hughes' poetry into three phases. The first phase was in 1950s when Hughes focuses on the poetic language and linguistic form; the second phase was in 1960s when the Hughes view myths as a main subject of his poem and surrealism is included; the third phase was from 1970s to 1980s when he brings natural scenery and mystery into his poems. Scigaj holds in this work that Hughes' poetry is religious, sometimes in a meditative way, often in an energetic way. Walder Dennis published a book also titled *Ted Hughes* (1987). This book is basically thematic, focusing on Hughes' myths of violence and masculinity, but seeing these tempered by more recent "feminine" poems.

The third period of studies on Ted Hughes is the 1990s. Keith Sagar collects ten critical essays about poems of Ted Hughes in his book *The Challenge of Ted Hughes* (1994), and discussed the death theme, mythical theme, narrative skills, romanticism, existentialism and ecological characteristics. Bere Carol writes an essay about Hughes' *Birthday Letters* (1998). She mainly discusses the poetic sequence of the *Birthday Letters* and examines their subject of Hughes' relationship with his late wife, the poet Sylvia Plath. The themes of Plath's creative life as a poet and her psychological anguish are commented on, and contrasts between the poetic styles of Plath and Hughes are explored. Bere holds that Hughes' concern with myth and spirituality; his complex response to both the beauty and essentially atavistic elements in nature; his overall sense of determinism, as well as the efforts toward integration or wholeness that are at the root of his poetry, early and late (1998, pp.556-557). *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion, and Beyond* by Bentley Paul, ed. (1998) is an introductory guide to Hughes that places him within the context of developments in poetic and literary theory during his lifetime. In 1999, Beeson Lois in *An appreciation of Ted Hughes* (1999, p.187) describes

the extent and a variety of author Ted Hughes' educational activities. She focuses on Hughes' creative spirit in children; Hughes' view on the nature of truth; approaches to training the imagination; practical involvement in a wide range of literary and environmental projects. She holds that Hughes lays down an unmistakable challenge to education orthodoxy.

The last stage is in the 21st century. The book *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the Story of the Birthday Letters* by Wagner, Erica (2000) offered a careful examination of the writings that detail the minds and relationship of poetry's most harrowing couple. In 2001 Anthony Wilson published the critical article *Ted Hughes' Poetry for Children*. In this article, Anthony examined Hughes' individual collections for children, both in their own terms as poetry and in terms of their intended audience. He pointed out that Hughes' poetry for children was an attempt, with varying degrees of success, to create a body of work that remained true to his gift of 'caging' the minute within real and imaginary worlds, and that he expended considerable energy in staying faithful, not only to the world as he saw it, but also to the way his work appeared in, and took its place within, that world. *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* published by Roberts Neil (2006) focuses on the biography of Hughes. While Roberts does address Hughes' marriage to Sylvia Plath, he treats Hughes as a talented and influential poet in his own right. He examines Hughes' unpublished letters and notebooks to glean information about his early life, his thoughts on his position as Poet Laureate, and the impact that his wife's suicide had on him and his writing. This is a well-written study of Hughes' life and his development at a poet. In 2013 Meyers Jeffrey wrote an essay *Ted Hughes: War Poet* (2013, pp.30-39) which focused on poet Ted Hughes and his war poems. It discussed how the experiences of his father and uncle in World War I affect his art and notes that the work of war poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon had influenced Hughes' poetry. Meyers believes that Hughes' poems now resonate more forcefully than ever as we try to help the current wave of shell-shocked victims of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The study of this period lays much stress on Hughes' life and writing career and war themes, which casts a good deal with light upon poems that are perhaps still novel enough to perplex many readers.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON TED HUGHES AT HOME

The domestic research on Ted Hughes began at a comparatively late age, and the number of the works is quite limited. Professor Zhang Zhongzai was the first Chinese scholar who systematically introduced Hughes and his poetry to the Chinese academic community. He mentioned Hughes and made comments on him and

his poetry in the essay *Ted Hughes: British Laurel Poet* (1985, pp.26-29). Zhang Zhongzai beholds that Hughes' poetic art is not restricted to tradition, the rhythm is extremely flexible, and the language is powerful. He also introduced and interpreted some of Hughes' classic animal poems, such as: *The Fox of Thought*, *Hawk*, and some of the poems in the collection of *Crows*. Thereafter some scholars in China began to pay attention to Ted Hughes' poetry and comments on him mainly focus on the following aspects: writing features, cultural connotation, theme, animal images, as well as analysis from different literary theories.

The critics' opinions towards the themes of Ted Hughes' poetry differs from one another. Therefore, Hughes is often labeled as animal poet, nature poet, war poet, poet

of violence, poet of ecology and so on. As an "animal poet", the animal image in Ted Hughes' poetry is frequently analyzed by the literary critic. Li Chengjian centers on analyzing the imagery of Hughes' early masterpieces, *The Raven*, *Eagle in the Rain*, and *Herd of Gods*. Li Chengjian also explored the thematic significance and value of Hughes' poems by exploring the mechanism of the theme of violence, the inherent characteristics of violent poetry, and the poet's poetic theory. Her research results helped the Chinese academic community and readers to understand Hughes' early works and their characteristics in a comprehensive and detailed way (Li Chenjian, 2000) Liu Guoqing and Shi Aixia (2011) also discusses the "crow" to make it clear that the establishment of this image should take the creation context of the work into consideration, which means that the peculiarity of the crow image Indian mythology, as well as its metaphorical quality should not be ignored. They state that the crow in Ted Hughes' poetry is a bird heading towards the goal of becoming an ecoman.

It is worth noticing that Liu Guoqing is a Chinese scholar who systematically and profoundly studies Hughes' ecological thought. In his thesis, he analyzed the double crisis faced by today's western society from Hughes' outlook on nature and social historical context. Liu Guoqing (2004) argues that Hughes constructed his own ecological thinking while attacking anthropocentrism in his poetry creation. He points out that modern people are facing an all-round alienation of natural ecology, spiritual ecology and social ecology, and Hughes believes that the root of all these evils comes from . Hughes vigorously reveals the evil consequences of alienation and seeks to explore the deep level from the cultural level Root, and finally establish a harmonious relationship between man and nature, to achieve an aesthetic utopia beyond alienation. (Liu, 2007) Liu Guoqing proposes that Hughes presents all types of ecological issues in his work. He also criticizes anthropocentrism and rationalism which are the cause of ecological issues (Liu, 2009). Another scholar, Chen Hong, explored Hughes' social ecological

perspective from another angle. She holds that Hughes' early and middle poems emphasize the opposition and separation between man and nature, and the later poems are more about the close integration of human and nature. And Ms. Chen believes that Hughes manages to speak out his heart-felt ecological consciousness. Animals should not be blamed for the violence because violence seems a necessity for their survival in front of the tyrannical man. Instead, man is sure to be punished for his ruthlessness and indifference to nature (Chen, 2006).

Li Zeng and Liu Guoqing (2004) co-write *Obsessive Nature Complex---A Study of Ted Hughes' Outlook on Nature and His Nature Poems* to discuss Hughes' nature poems and his conception of nature. They state that the Hughes himself actively and extensively read Eastern and Western works on the relationship between man and nature, and was deeply affected by it, thus gradually forming his own view of nature and highlighting his works. The formation of Hughes' collection of poems is also the process of the formation of his outlook on nature and relationship between human and nature. Li Peipei (2014) puts forward that the nature images including hawk, crabs and puma in Hughes' works literally undertake the role of presenting the reality and warning the future. She analyzed Hughes' poem from the perspectives of historical point of view by using comparisons between nature and man and rural life and modern urbanization.

In cultural connotation, the critics probe into Ted aspects in religious culture. Li Yan (2004) probes into Hughes' Taoism in her Master thesis. She reveals Hughes' perfect way to achieve the harmonious unification of the external natural world and the inner spiritual world , thus confirming the true meaning of Taoism. Li Zidan and Ou Hong (2006) claimed that Hughes showed a very obvious Taoist tendency in his poetry creation in the middle and late periods, which was mainly reflected in his attitude to life, ecological outlook, and poetry creation. Li Zidan (2007) also points out that the true meaning of Hughes' native complex lies in his ability to take Britain, even the whole world into consideration instead of concerning with West Yorkshire alone.

Most of the scholars analyze Hughes' animal poems, only a few of them know about his children's poem. Li Zidan (2014) has thoroughly analyzed Hughes' children's poems. She believed that Hughes' children's poems have three dimensions: the bright and colorful sensory world, the wonderful imaginary world, and the spiritual and pan-spiritual world. Hughes advocates in children's poems that modern people heal the human spiritual alienation caused by industrial civilization by returning to childhood, rebuilding the relationship between man and nature, and living poetically as children. Li Qiongshi (2014) discusses the beauty of sound rhythm, beauty of rhetoric, beauty of imagination, and beauty of theme in Ted Hughes children's poems. She held that the beauty of Ted Hughes'

poetry for children lies in its unique form and vivid figurative language and in the shock on the soul brought by the various kinds of imagination and true and deep themes. Hughes is concerned with children and children's literature and children's poetry is an inseparable aspect of his artistic achievements. However, the lack of research on children's works in China will definitely affect the comprehensiveness and integrity of Hughes' domestic research.

When it comes to the violence reflected in Hughes' poetry, Chen Hong claims that Hughes' understanding of "violence" expresses his deep insights into animal and human nature as well as ecological awareness. She believes that animals have a kind of active violence, a vibrant wild instinct, and a kind of "valuable violence" that looks like vitality. The indulgence of human beings on their own instincts not only leads to the brutality and killing of animals, but also disability, which is a kind of negative violence. To a certain extent, it is not the beasts but the humans that have the brutal violence. Liu Guoqing (2010) holds that the critics not only lack the understanding of Ted Hughes' view of violence, but also have a single perspective of research. Only when we know Hughes' outlook on violence and the reason for his persistent writing of violence in his nature poems, and study his poems both from human perspective and nature perspective, can we have better understanding of Hughes' nature poems.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be drawn from the above that the research findings on Ted Hughes' poetic works are quite rich. Some of them put emphasis on studying the poet, some on analyzing the writing some make comments on one image, theme, ecologism, violence and so on in Ted Hughes' poetry, and others make comments on one certain poetic work or one single poem of Hughes. However, there

has not been a systematic survey upon Hughes' poetry from the masculine perspective so far. So it is of much significance and innovation to analyze Ted Hughes' poetry from the perspective of manliness.

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