CHAPTER II

THE HUMAN WORLD: WOMEN

The disintegration experienced by the modern civilization is best expressed by Ted Hughes through the portrayal of the characters in his poetry, and it is in the women that Hughes sees this fall to be most complete and disastrous. For, they are the earthly representatives of the White Goddess, the divinity symbolizing the natural world. As the human counterparts of this elemental deity, the women should have been the model of fertility and vitality. But in the contemporary world, they happen to be barren and ineffectual, leading very monotonous and sterile lives. The contrast between the poet's expectations and the real situation make the characters appear doubly pathetic and woeful.

Hughes explains the reasons for his veneration of the female power whose neglect by the people of England was not merely deadening for the civilization but even dangerous for the individual. He elucidates the theories by means of which he relates his poetry to the inner creative energy, in an interview with Egbert Faas:

Poetry only records these movements in the general life . . . it doesn't investigate them. The presence of the great goddess of the primeval world, which Catholic countries have managed
to retain in the figure of Mary, is precisely what England seems to have lacked, since the Civil War . . . where negotiations were finally broken off.¹

This Goddess neglected by the English people is the Dionysian power, the intuitive power which is creative and potentially violent. Like Nietzsche, Hughes believes in the existence of a divine power in man, now eclipsed, but yet likely to manifest itself in due course of time. The modern world, in his view, lacks the Dionysian impulse which according to Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music is the primitive, irrational and health giving force as opposed to the self-conscious and rational Apollonian force. Convinced of the potency of the Dionysian energy to rekindle the human emotions of brotherhood and amity among people and reunite mankind with a thus-far hostile natural world, Nietzsche writes:

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the convenant between man and man again established, but also estranged, hostile, or subjugated nature again celebrates her reconciliation with her lost son, man.²

This Dionysian force, apparently the perfect solution to the modern dilemma, is repressed in the present times, and assumes dangerous proportions. It takes root in the threatening forces of the unconscious. The destructive and thereby terrifying aspects of these powers are perhaps best expressed in the words of Carl Jung:

Dionysus is the abyss of impassioned dissolution, where all human distinctions are merged in the animal divinity of the primordial psyche—a blissful and terrible experience. Humanity, huddling behind
the walls of its culture, believes it has escaped this experience, until it succeeds in letting loose another orgy of bloodshed. 3

Dionysus therefore represents the violent, primitive impulses in mankind, normally held in control, but quite capable of turning destructive. Hughes finds the Dionysian power expressed in the primitive and unrepressed forces of nature. Since the Apollonian qualities of order and method are not manifested there, the natural elements tend to be wayward. To be creatively effective, these wayward forces should be detected and controlled, a perfect blending of the Apollonian and Dionysian elements is essential.

In his poems, Hughes describes women who live a life sheltered from passion and the divine creative energy. They clearly fall short of Hughes's ideal, derived largely from the theories of Robert Graves.

It was Robert Graves who was mainly responsible in the twentieth century for attempting to replace the Western notion of an autocratic masculine God with the idea of a female divinity associated with the creative imagination and natural life. He considered her the source of inspiration for all poets.

The poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth: his heart breaks with longing and love for her. She is the Flower-goddess Olwen or Blodeuwedd; but she is also Blodeuwedd the Owl, lamp-eyed, hooting dismally, with her foul nest in the hollow of a dead tree, or Circe the pitiless falcon, or Lamia with her flickering tongue, or the snarling-chopped Sow-goddess, or the mare-headed Rhiannon who feeds on raw flesh. Odi Atque Amo: 'to be in love with' is also to hate. Determined to escape from the dilemma, the Apollonian teaches himself to despise woman and teaches woman to despise herself.
The very fact of the dual nature of the White Goddess is responsible for her lack of popularity in the vulgar sense of the term. "Well-meaning" and "intelligent" men of a "peaceful temperament" keep away from her fearing her violent destructive nature, for the Apollonian qualities dominate. Graves substantiates his arguments with the help of practical information and statistical data:

This is an Apollonian civilization. It is true that in English-speaking countries the social position of women has improved enormously in the last fifty years and is likely to improve still more now that so large a part of the national wealth is in the control of women--in the United States more than a half; but the age of religious revelation seems to be over, and social security is so intricately bound up with marriage and the family--even where registry marriages predominate--that the White Goddess in her orgiastic character seems to have no chance of staging a come-back, until women themselves grow weary of decadent patriarchalism, and turn Bassarids again. This is unlikely as yet, though the archives of morbid pathology are full of Bassarid case-histories. An English or American woman in a nervous breakdown of sexual origin will often instinctively reproduce in faithful and disgusting detail much of the ancient Dionysiac ritual. I have witnessed it myself in helpless terror.

It is precisely such situations passive and sheltered from any violence whatsoever that Hughes delineates in his poems. This sorry plight is particularly accentuated in the women in his poems.

The women of Hughes poems ignore the real life around them and surround themselves with a static life of meaningless gestures. The protagonist of "The Secretary" (HR), for instance is a typical young girl... who lives a life of dull routine
and sterile activity. Like Eliot's typist in the "Wasteland", she lives a life of mechanical drudgery, but unlike the typist, she does not even dare to nurture the notion of a lover. She seems to be repelled by any physical sensation and would probably react with violent and exaggerated revulsion to any physical overture:

If I should touch her she would shriek and weeping
Crawl off to nurse the terrible wound: all
Day like a starling under the bellies of bulls
She hurries among men, ducking, peeping,
Off in a whirl at the first move of a horn
At dusk she scuttles down the gauntlet of lust
Like a clockwork mouse.

Her whole life seems to consist of a series of manoeuvres to avoid contact with men. All day long she works among men in her official capacity, but does not cherish any personal desire or wish for any change in her monotonous lifestyle. Though young and beautiful, her puritanical approach to life leads her to avoid sensuous pleasures and suppress her natural beauty. Even a mere touch from a man would seem like desecration to her. So, at the violet hour when even the typist of T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" awaits her man, the secretary finds herself "Safe home at last" settling down to unproductive domesticity. Her only creative outlet lies in patching up clothes and cooking "delicate" suppers. She is quite blind to the fact that her youthful beauty is being wasted and her life made fruitless. She banishes all thoughts of sex as she

Goes to bed early, shuts out with the light
Her thirty years, and lies with buttocks tight,
Hiding her lovely eyes until daybreak.
Hughes here implies that by repressing her beauty and sensual vitality, the girl has denied not only herself but also a whole society awaiting rejuvenation. She is clearly a representative of an artificial urban civilization upholding values that serve only to destroy it.

That this decadent state is not limited to a particular individual or a specified group is made obvious by Hughes's portrayal of different people taken from varying age groups and social backgrounds. The uncompromising old woman "The Hag" (HR) not only denies herself but forces a life of austerity upon her young and beautiful daughter. Unlike the witch in Coleridge's Christabel who affects love towards the pretty princess to destroy her, Hughes's old hag prefers to hide away her love for fear of being drowned by its excesses. She forcibly keeps her daughter away from all company and locked up within a stony edifice out of fear that her beauty would be degraded and misused. The old woman was aware of only one method of saving her daughter's beauty from destruction, that of repression. In her limited puritanical world, the only security she knows is the one of restraint which was what she wished to propagate by her severe manner. In order to prevent her daughter from behaving wantonly she turns into a stern disciplinarian,

Who has dragged her pretty daughter home from college,
Who has locked up her pretty eyes in a brick house
And has sworn her pretty mouth shall rot like fruit
Before the world shall make a jam of it
To spread on every palate.

In order to prevent her daughter's beauty from being bandied
about thereby losing its sanctity, the hag prefers to cover up her love for the girl with a mask of love. The witch in the fairy tale assumed a "posture of love" to deceive the princess into staying within her "narrow intestine" by lying "in a certain way/At night lest the horrible angular black hatred/Poke through her side and surprise the pretty princess". The modern mother, on the other hand lay "in a certain way" to prevent the daughter from seeing the genuine love within her for she found spite a better weapon to protect her daughter than love:

And so saying,
She must lie perforce at night in a certain way
Lest the heart break through her side and burst the walls
And surprise her daughter with an extravagance
Of tearful love, who finds it easier
To resign her hope of a world wide with love,
And even to rot in the dark, but easier under
Nine bolts of spite than on one leash of love.

The daughter is more prepared to accept the chains of bondage under the guise of maliciousness than of genuine affection. Hughes here offers his critique of the present civilization which understands the bonds of hatred rather than of love, by contrasting the happenings of the present with those of a previous age where love was the emotion that took prominence. Though true love exists within the home, the girl prefers the ostentatious love of the marketplace and cannot recognize sincere passion or genuine devotion. While the princess of an earlier generation accepted the bond of love and natural affection, the young girl of a modern civilization can understand only the language of selfishness and petty dislikes. Mere baubles and affectations
of love seem more acceptable and real to her than the honest avowals of maternal devotion. She lives in a world full of false conceptions and lacking in genuine values.

But this is not true of every individual as evidenced from his portrayal of a young girl in "Macaw and Little Miss" (HR). Though youthful and immature, the maiden is conscious of the existence of some mighty power that can overwhelm the ordinariness of her life. She suspects the hidden presence of this force in the animal world, but is unable to expose it by any amount of cajoling and persuasion. The "staring combustion" and "the stoking devils of his eyes" give abundant indication of the existence of the hidden volcanic passions in the caged bird, but there is no open display of these emotions. The violent forces take form only in her dreams where the tough warrior advances towards her in sexual assault:

The spun glass of her body bared and so gleam-still
Her brimming eyes do not tremble or spill
The dream where the warrior comes, lightning and iron
Smashing and burning and rending towards her loin:
Deep into her pillow her silence pleads.

But these primitive energies are not realized in her waking world. She makes several efforts to woo the bird into displaying the hidden passion reflected in "his furnace/with eyes red-raw," but she can elicit no response from him. Finally, in sheer frustration, she strikes the cage in fury and "swirls out". The bird's reaction is immediate and violent:

She strikes the cage in a tantrum and swirls out:
Instantly beak, wings, talons crash
The bars in conflagration and frenzy
And his shriek shakes the house.
But this dramatic display of passion is wasted, for there is none to watch him in action. The girl has, quite significantly, left the room and was probably unaware of the sudden exhibition of hidden energies. Through this portrait, Hughes discloses the incapability of an age to identify its instinctive energy or even respond to it when it does finally manage to make itself manifest.

Hughes tries to indicate that this lack of communion with the instinctive and the mystical powers did not exist in a byegone age by his description of the women in Celtic folklore. In "Witches" (Lupercal), Hughes refers to an old Irish belief that all women, young or old without exception, were transformed into unearthly witches, every night. After a night of dancing and wild celebration, they returned rejuvenated, to a life of sobriety and calm, alongside their husbands.

Once was every woman the witch
To ride a weed the ragwort road;
Devil to do whatever she would:
Each rosebud, every old bitch.
Did they bargain their bodies or no?
Proprietary the devil that
Went horsing on their every thought
When they scowled the strong and lucky low.
Dancing in Ireland nightly, gone
To Norway (the ploughboy bridled),
Nightlong under the blackamoor spraddled,
Back beside their spouse by dawn
As if they had dreamed all.

The nightlong activities described in the poem were probably a fulfilment of their hidden desires and suppressed passions. They could even have dreamed of the orgies. But by the very existence of such an outlet they were able to lead happier and more fulfilled
lives. Though women had to suffer several hardships and grievous abuse from an indifferent masculine populace, they were able to survive the onslaught by virtue of this secret escape. After examining the scientific and psychological explanations for this phenomenon, Hughes imagines that the practice survives in the present age. No science can penetrate into a woman's dream world and expose her secret thoughts and mental activities:

Bitches still sulk, rosebuds blow,
And we are devilled. And though these weep
Over our harms, who's to know
Where their feet dance while their heads sleep?

The secret world of the imagination seems to be the only place where the vital energies and impulses can find true and natural expression in the present age. It also represents the force that takes charge when the rational intellect is at rest.

The neglect of the natural emotions has even resulted in the break up of primitive relations like the man-woman bonds or even the vital instincts. Love is still a powerful emotion but cannot find true expression in a world that has lost its links with its vital energies. In "Parlour-piece" (HR), Hughes explores the opposing extreme states to which love can lead people. While Robert Frost imagined fire and ice resulting from either desire or cold-blooded hatred to be the means by which the world could end, Hughes imagines fire and flood to be the means of survival in a barren and arid world. But the fire and flood Hughes describes are those resulting from intense love. The two lovers seated in the parlour are afraid to speak for fear that speech
would be an outlet for the fires of passion within them, which once released would be beyond control and possibly destructive. Their unspoken passion is like a dam filled with water which could burst and form a flood if even a trickle of water escaped by accident. Therefore the two lovers stay silent and still, reining in their emotions with utmost care and seeming to be just casually drinking tea:

These two sat speechlessly:
Pale cool tea in tea-cups chaperoned
Stillness, silence, the eyes
Where fire and flood strained.

The situation, almost Victorian in its sedate sobriety is far from placid and completely deceptive for the violence and energy exist in their eyes, hidden to the onlooker, but doubly powerful due to its suppressed power.

But genuine emotion such as this is indeed a rare commodity, extremely difficult to come by and difficult to sustain. Very often the unifying force between man and woman is not love but the fear of death. Therefore death is indirectly the reason or the excuse for people to be thrown into life. Keith Sagar explains the relationship between Pluto, the God of the underworld and Dionysus, the creative force:

The god of the underworld may be the god of death, and February the month of the dead, but Persephone in the underworld is fertilized by Pluto and gives birth to Dionysus, who is Pluto himself in his creative, life-giving aspect.

In "A Modest Proposal" Hughes elucidates the influence of the fear of death on a couple of lovers in figurative terms.
The lovers are described as "two wolves, come separately to a wood whose main occupation now is to attempt to completely possess each other. The longing has become a mad obsession where they attack each other and injure themselves all the while picturing "a mad final satisfaction":

Now neither's able to sleep--even at a distance
Distracted by the soft competing pulse
Of the other; nor able to hunt--at every step
Looking backwards and sideways, warying to listen
For the other's slavering rush. Neither can make die
The painful burning of the coal in its heart
Till the other's body and the whole wood is its own
Then it might sob contentment toward the moon.

In the contemporary framework, even love, the unselfish emotion has deteriorated into a race for ownership. In their competition for ownership, they even develop an unhealthy hatred for each other and are quite prepared to hurt themselves to soothe the burning passion for union within them. But all their enmity and skirmishes come to an abrupt end when they catch a glimpse of

The great lord from hunting. His embroidered
Cloak floats, the tail of his horse pours,
And at his stirrup the two great-eyed grey hounds
That day after day bring down the towering stag
Leap like one, making delighted sounds.

The majestic vision of Death, out on a hunt is enough to hush them for now their skirmishes appear foolish and unwarranted. They are filled with terror at his greater power. The picture of the two great-eyed greyhounds who by acting as one can bring down even the "towering stag" is a powerful lesson for them for they succeed with ease and comfort, happy at their job which seems effortless. The wolves, on the other hand, have several
injuries on their 'hide' resulting from their violent clashes apart from the emotional fury and the "rage hoarse in its labouring/Chest after a skirmish." The dramatic apparition is powerful enough to stop all their meaningless rivalry and irrelevant collisions.

In spite of such fears and desperations, marital unions in the contemporary world appear to be flimsy and disintegrating. Marriage brings in additional problems, for sex, while uniting individuals on the physical plane, divides them on an emotional plane resulting in skirmishes such as the ones described in "A Modest Proposal" (HR). In another poem, "Incompatibilities" (HR), Hughes makes the situation more explicit:

Desire's a vicious separator in spite
Of its twisting women around men:
Cold-chisels two selves single as it welds hot
Iron of their separates to one.

While desire attempts desperately to unite individuals using violence and devious methods to cover up the "division", it cannot synthesize. Unlike love which is divine and sanctified, it cannot recreate the glory of the Garden of Eden or the joys of heaven. It can only bring in a renewed consciousness of the black void of existence that replaces the "star that lights the face," and the two individuals find

Each, each second, lonelier and further
Falling alone through the endless
Without-world of the other, though both here
Twist so close they choke their cries.

The awareness of their separation and aloneness increases their desperation and they try to get physically closer but they can
find no emotional satisfaction from such a union.

Hughes portrays the complete failure of the domestic framework to provide the warmth and solace expected from it in the poem "Her Husband" (Wodwo). Set in a background directly from D. H. Lawrence, Hughes portrays the domestic misery of a poorly-matched couple. The husband, a coal miner, arrives home grimy and drunk, asserting his male prerogatives by virtue of the fact that he is the bread winner:

Comes home dull with coal-dust deliberately
To grime the sink and foul towels and let her
Learn with scrubbing brush and scrubbing board
The stubborn character of money.

And let her learn through what kind of dust
He has earned his thirst and the right to quench it
And what sweat he has exchanged for his money
And the blood-weight of money. He'll humble her

With new light on her obligations.

Though the wife is apparently passive at this display of authority, she is full of contempt and takes her revenge by serving him "fried, woody chips, kept warm two hours in the oven" as part of her answer. Furious at such shoddy treatment, the man slams them back into the fire and departs from the house all the time singing loudly and harshly to proclaim his victory to the world, and leaving her with her back "bunched into a hump as an insult."

Their problem appears insoluble

For they will have their rights.
Their jurors are to be assembled
From the little crumbs of soot. Their brief
Goes straight up to heaven and nothing more is heard of it.

Neither the man nor the woman are individually at fault in this situation, for they are placed in impossible circumstances from
which they can be extricated only by a superior power. But God seems to care little for their condition as there is no response from heaven. He is the "approving God" of the Dickensonian poem who takes cruelty and misery to be part of the universal natural scheme.

Time is another major factor that destroys the force and vigour of true love and renders relationships void. When the love is fresh and vigorous, the lovers pay no heed to time and have no consciousness of its passing. When they sit together in quiet companionship watching the darkness unfolding and kisses are repeated, time appears to be non-existent. Mechanical contrivances like clocks cease to have any import in a world where only natural experiences count.

It is midsummer: the leaves hang big and still:
Behind the eye a star,
Under the silk of the wrist a sea, tell
Time is nowhere. (“September”—HR)

The human beings become part of nature, judging time from the leaves and are starry-eyed and silken to the touch by virtue of their unadulterated inartificiality. But such an ideally harmonious state cannot last for eternity and time destroys the relationship that gives it no importance. The clock is still unnecessary in this extreme stage, but now it is not because time stands still. On the contrary, it moves so fast that there is no need for any clock. The human apparatus is equipped enough to be conscious of every rapid minute for their life is now timed by their memories.
We stand; leaves have not timed the summer.
No clock now needs
Tell we have only what we remember:
Minutes uproaring with our heads

Like an unfortunate King's and his Queen's
When the senseless mob rules;
And quietly the trees casting their crowns
Into the pools.

The couple is still able to see the vigorous energies released by love through their memory, but the force of the onrush of emotion is so overwhelming that they can only watch it helplessly, unable to control the violent upsurge and quietly prepare to relinquish their sovereignty over the unruly passion. Hughes seems to indicate that old age, with its attendant weaknesses cannot cope with the vagaries and commotions resulting from a continuing passion.

Though the situation of passivity and stagnation seen in these relations is not actively created by the respective women, they contribute a good deal to the state of stasis by their inactivity. The negative import of whatever actions the women do take are accentuated by Hughes in his portrayal of Eve and the man-woman relations in the Biblical situation in the Crow poems. There Eve is portrayed as the representative of all womankind with its numerous flaws, and Adam and Eve are often referred to simply as Man and Woman. In the beginning, these two people are passive, mercilessly acted upon by a mischievous Crow and betrayed by a helpless and inactive God. The old harmony is destroyed and discord follows. A general picture regarding the shape of things to come is already presented in
"Reville" (Wodwo). Adam and Eve, living in a state of continuous and permanent bliss are rudely and abruptly disturbed by the serpent:

Adam and lovely Eve
Deep in their first dream
Each the everlasting
Holy One of the other
Woke with cries of pain.
Each clutched a throbbing wound--
A sudden, cruel bite.

With that painful cry, came the Fall which led to the destruction of the world under the coils of the evil represented by the serpent. The two innocent human beings are quite astonished at the unexpected turn of events for they have no conscious part in them. In "A Childish Prank" (Crow), Hughes provides his poetic version of how sexuality came to be. The bodies of Man and Woman, immediately after creation lay "without souls,/Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert" and God worried by the enormity of the problem drifted into sleep. Crow, arriving on the scene produced an immediate solution by cutting the worm in two and stuffing the two ends into the two human beings separately:

He bit the Worm, God's only son,
Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half
With the wounded end hanging out.
He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman
And it crept in deeper and up
To peer out through her eyes
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O it was painful.

As the two halves belonged to one individual, they kept trying to unite and undo their separation, thereby leading to a new
development, that of sexual desire in mankind. In order to relieve the pain of division, union became a necessity. It was also a means of reinvigorating them and getting rid of their dull inertness, for unknown even to themselves they had already started acting on their impulses:

Man awoke being dragged across the grass.
Woman awoke to see him coming.
Neither knew what had happened.

And God had no part to play for He continued to sleep while Crow laughed over the prank he had played. Thus the instinctive impulse arose as an unguided evil trick played upon an innocent mankind, who had to suffer the consequences of God's inadequacy permanently.

In the poem "Crow's First Lesson" (Crow), Hughes offers another version of the origin of sexuality. God, in an attempt to teach Crow to talk makes him pronounce the word "Love". Unfamiliar with the emotion, Crow can only gape and this results in the creation of horrorsome and disease-producing creatures like the shark, the mosquito, the bluefly and the tsetse fly one after the other until finally

Crow convulsed, gaped, retched and
Man's bodiless prodigious head
Bulbed out onto the earth, with swivelling eyes,
Jabbering protest--

And Crow retched again, before God could stop him.
And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck and tightened.
The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept--

Man and Woman are once again helpless and acted upon by an evil-minded Crow, who twists God's intentions and creates
impossible situations that cannot be altered, even by Him.

But though inactive and helpless, the Woman's passivity seems more negative and harmful when viewed in the general framework. Her very presence makes the evil possible and she is therefore guilty of sinning against man, against God and even against the serpent. In "Apple Tragedy" (Crow), Hughes puts forth his ideas on how the concepts of adultery and rape came into being. The tale begins with God introducing his "new game" of cider to the serpent. The serpent has a good drink and curls harmlessly into a question mark. Adam follows suit and calls upon the snake to be his god. The trouble starts when Eve enters the fray:

Eve drank and opened her legs
And called to the cockeyed serpent
And gave him a wild time.
God ran and told Adam
Who in drunken rage tried to hang himself in the orchard.

The serpent tried to explain, crying 'Stop'
But drink was splitting his syllable
And Eve started screeching: 'Rape! Rape!'
And stamping on his head.

The whole sequence of events, which involves adultery, spying, attempted suicide, the serpent's attempts at explanation and the false accusations by Eve, including several elements of a crime thriller, are the outcome of God's experiments with cider, a modern version of the apple. And the consequences of these events are permanent and lasting:
Now whenever the snake appears she screeches
'Here it comes again! Help! Help!'
Then Adam smashes a chair on its head,
And God says: 'I am well pleased'

And everything goes to hell.

In this tale, Eve, though guilty of seducing the serpent, pleads
innocence, and Adam acts in her defence. The serpent, the partially
guilty victim, is accused of all the crimes and punished adequately.
God appears here as the active instigator of all the unruly
passions, who watches the unruly drama with mischievous and
evil intent, for He is quite complacent and pleased that everything
goes to hell as He had planned. For a change, the crow is not
a participant. Instead God appears to take his place as a
prankster creating all kinds of sex-linked problems for the
serpent and for mankind.

In "Lovesong" (Crow), Hughes portrays a very horrifying
and strangulating picture of human love, where each lover takes
over the individuality of the other. Possession is more important
than the unselfish giving away of oneself in the contemporary
love relationship.

He loved her and she loved him
His kisses sucked out her whole past and future or tried to
He had no other appetite
She bit him she gnawed him she sucked
She wanted him completely inside her
Safe and sure forever and ever
Their little cries fluttered into the curtains

The grasping clawing union continues in this vein until finally
in the morning "they wore each other's face." In such relation­
ships, there is little room for freedom and creativity and therefore
the two partners are stifled rather than rendered productive and creatively fertile by their association.

In Cave Birds, Hughes presents the woman-man relationship in positive terms. In the poem "Birde and groom lay hidden for three days" he portrays the union of the male and female aspects of an individual in sexual terminology. The couple discover each other moving from one physical organ to another, discovering each afresh and taking great pleasure in each disclosure. They are fearful, yet astonished at their findings, and go ahead on a voyage of delightful discovery alighting upon new revelations at every step:

He gives her her skin
He just seemed to pull it down out of the air and lay it over her
She weeps with fearfulness and astonishment

Now she has brought his feet, she is connecting them
So that his whole body lights up

They keep taking each other to the sun,
they find they can easily
To test each new thing at each new step

Hughes gives a detailed account of each new form of adoration as the couple proceed to unravel each step of the "superhuman puzzle" that their physical body has been, until finally they reach the climax of their discovery:

So, gasping with joy, with cries of wonderment
Like two gods of mud
Sprawling in the dirt, but with infinite care
They bring each other to perfection.

The union seems ideal and perfect, but a couple of poems later the poet states his realization that this is not so and studies a new angle to relationships in a new volume of poems.
The degraded state of affairs is reflected in the very divinity, for the White Goddess herself is portrayed by Hughes in *Gaudete* as a sick and dying woman. In the Prologue, we are introduced to a "Woman tangled in the skin of wolves" lying on a rock floor, under a rocky dome. In her appearance and apparel, she obviously has close links with the animal world:

... her face half-animal
And the half-closed animal eyes, clear-dark
back to the first creature
And the animal mane
The animal cheekbone and jaw, in the fire's flicker
The animal tendon in the turned throat
The upper lip lifted, dark and clean as a dark flower

(*Gaudete*, p. 14)

Hughes's repeated use of the epithet "animal" in his description of the woman makes his intentions obvious. The woman clearly stands for the female principle, the elusive Dionysian deity. Described by Robert Graves as the White Goddess, she depicts everything natural, instinctive and emotional in contrast to the rational and the intellectual in man. Keith Sagar, in his pioneering work on Hughes entitled *The Art of Ted Hughes*, also identifies the woman as the female nature spirit:

The woman is clearly 'the goddess of natural law and of love, who was the goddess of all sensation and organic life' (*A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, 187). She is Isis, mother of the gods, Graves' White Goddess. In psychological terms, she is Jung's Anima.8

This interpretation of the woman as the White Goddess, the power in vital energy, is put forward by other critics as well. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, in their study, adhere to this view and their comments help to reinforce the theory:
What she seems to represent is the integrated animal self (beautifully caught in the description of her eyes as 'clear-dark back to the first creature'). Certainly she acts as an announcement of a preoccupation with the animal energies of characters in the narrative. Not only is she half-animal, half-human, she is both dead and alive. She is an embodiment of the identity of Hades and Dionysos.

But despite all her animal likenesses, she seems to possess none of the animal vigour, for she is taken to be dead. By her helpless and diseased condition, she provides the answer to the puzzle of the dead bodies on the street. For the roads are peopled only by a lifeless populace. But all hope is not yet lost, for the beautiful woman is still alive. Although her pulse and her breath are absent, Reverend Lumb, the protagonist, finds that on lifting open her moist eyelid "the startling brilliant gaze knifes into him." He is completely taken aback and thrown into confusion by the intensity of her expression. Obviously all is not lost and there is plenty of hope for she is not yet "dead". Though physically ailing, she is intrinsically powerful as evident from a glimpse into her essential soul seen through her eyes briefly.

In order to bring this hidden power out into the open, there is only one way, according to Hughes—the ritualistic alternative. In the concluding poem "Lupercalia" of his collection Lupercal, Hughes describes an ancient Roman ritual by means of which an attempt was made to revive the dying vital energies in a barren group of women. At the ancient festival of Lupercalia, Lupercus, the fertility god, and hence a variant of Dionysus,
was worshipped at a temple in Rome called the Lupercal. The related rituals which aspire to restore fertility to barren women, the ceremonies include the sacrifice of dogs and goats after which young male athletes, blessed by the priests with blood and milk, raced through the streets striking the waiting barren women as they passed with whips of goat-skin. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare refers to the presence of Calpurnia, Caesar's wife as one of the women and Mark Antony's appearance as one of the athletes, for Caesar reminds Antony:

> Forget not, in your speed Antonius,  
> To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say,  
> The barren touched in this holy chase,  
> Shake off their sterile curse.10

Hughes poem on the ancient ritual is separated into four parts, one for each of the participants—the dog, the goat, the women and the athletes. The woman's condition is likened to the touch of death, for neither the past nor the future live in her:

> This woman's as from death's touch: a surviving Barrenness: she abides; perfect,  
> But flung from the wheel of the living,  
> The past killed in her, the future plucked out.

Yet she lives in the hope of rekindling the dead fires within her with the blood of an animal. Perhaps the starkness of her life and "death's touch" would be replaced by an "old spark of the blood-heat." Hughes concludes by praying to his Creator to revive the fertility of a frozen age, just as the powerful athletes attempted to, by striking the women with the bloody goat skins as they hurried past:
Here Hughes demands the revival, not of an individual, but of a whole generation of unproductive creative activity.

In Gaudete, Hughes records how such an effort to rectify social sterility by invoking the hidden natural powers can go astray, if not adequately supported by wisdom and inspired guidance. In multitude and variety alike, the human characters in this work are numerous, and in their reaction to the unusual venture before them they respond in accordance with their varying temperaments. By an analysis of a few major characters in the poem, it is possible to perceive the manner in which the suppressed energy, when released, can disrupt the entire framework of a society unless carefully canalized into an acceptable mode with much intuitive deliberation and foresight. Being closer to the world of nature and instinctive impulses it is but natural for the women of the society to be the first to welcome the hidden Dionysian energies, while the men hesitate to commit themselves or react spontaneously.

But, like the goddess, the women reflect the degraded state of society where infertility and stagnation prevails and relationships are strained or non existent. Though a large number of women are described, there is no mention of any of them having children or indulging in any form of creative activity. The women of the parish had been leading very bored and monotonous
lives when Lumb persuades them to form their gatherings. The activities of the Womens Institute are henceforth kept a closely guarded secret within the circle of its members. Even the Secretary's husband has not been able to read the minutes of the meetings. This is in keeping with the Druidic tradition adhered to by the followers of the White Goddess. Robert Graves explains how this practice came into being:

The bond that united the poets of the British Isles in pre-Christian days was the oath of secrecy, sworn by all members of the endowed poetic colleges, to hele, conceal and never reveal the college secrets. 11

Being ardent devotees of Dionysus, these women of the parish perpetrate this custom of maintaining secrecy. They have little in common other than their association with Lumb and his ideals and their boredom. So it is but natural for them to vary in their responses to Lumb as well as to the partners they betray.

Maud, the vicar's housekeeper is one of the main characters in this drama. She is fanatic in her adherence to her faith and believes whole-heartedly in Lumb's Gospel of Love. She helps to organize the women of the parish into a devoted group and practises the outlandish rituals with bigoted religiosity. But her harsh rigidity and inflexible tenacity are frightening in their stubborn parochialism. She is full of nun-like intensity and arid sterility. Mysterious and secretive in her ways, she trusts no one with her personal thoughts and ideas. She goes alone to the grave yard and weeps over the black stone with the lonely word "Gaudete" engraved on it, which means "Rejoice", 
for she has no hope of a brighter future. She sees the Goddess is dead. She is suspicious of even her master and watches his actions, secretly examining his instruments and even confiscating some of them. She seems fully justified in her mistrust for she catches him planning a betrayal of her deity, the White Goddess. Keith Sagar describes this woman as the epitome of the White Goddess in his critical analysis of the poem. She is one of the losing participants in the mythical battle between Good and Evil:

Maud is one of the casualties of that indecent war, the maiden becomes old maid and murderous witch. Her true self, her capacity for joy in life (symbolized by her lost voice) is buried under a gravestone on which is engraved one lonely word 'Gaudete'—Rejoice! With boughs of apple-blossom, symbol of consummation, with which the White Goddess summoned Bran, she decorates her tomb, which is also the tomb of the Goddess herself 'who seems to be alive and dead' and whose ghost walks the graveyard ahead of Maud.12

Hughes also gives expression to this view of Maud as a partial incarnation of the Goddess. According to him, she is "the representative in this world of the woman that she is supposed to cure in the other world." In an interview with Egbert Faas, he explains his ideas with regard to Maud. The woman she follows into the graveyard is, to him,

... the buried real woman that has disappeared from this world. That's the general notion. Maud is her Doppelganger and so in a way has control over Lumb to bring about this renovation of women and therefore of life in general in this world. But while she is inadequate to it he is even more so, the whole situation being impossibly crystallized in the immovable dead end forms of society and physical life.13
Hughes ideas and Keith Sagar's views may be convincing in principle, but they are not so in practice. As Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts points out, "This is plausible at the level of intention..." But at the level of achievement, Hughes's argument is not so compelling, for there is no reason to accept the woman as the White Goddess, for the narrative gives no such indication. Maud has neither the vitality nor the joy of life, which are the essential Dionysian traits. But though she does not have the power of the Goddess, she takes over spiritual or imaginative control of the action during the later part of the narrative. Her knowledge of Lumb's secret arises out of her discovery of his hidden magical implements. She also becomes aware of his human aspirations, of his wish to leave the community and lead an ordinary married life by running away with Felicity. So she withdraws her blind faith and dependence of the vicar and becomes the dominantly active participant in a series of events that culminate in Lumb's death. After being the menacingly horrendous instrument of Felicity's ritualistic death, she denounces Lumb to the women gathered at the church announcing

That this girl is not one of them
That she is his selected wife
That he is going to abandon them and run away with this girl
Like an ordinary man
With his ordinary wife. (Gaudete, p. 147)

It is Lumb's betrayal of his own doctrines through this gesture that she condemns. By wishing to lead a normal life with Felicity, the vicar had compromised with his ideal notions and nullified his allegiance to the White Goddess. So it is but natural for
Maud, the unerring adherent to the tribe of supporters for the White Goddess, to expose him before the loyal followers and initiate the proceedings against him. In an unconscious reenactment of the process by means of which he was given human form, she seeks to destroy him, but is unable to do so without masculine support.

Maud has stripped the stag's pelt off him. She is flogging him over his bald skull with the cable-hard, twisted, horny stag's pizzle. The women have made one undersea monster, heaving in throes. Now he has wrenched his weapon from Maud. (Gaudete, p. 149)

He escapes temporarily from their clutches, but is soon hunted down like an animal. But once the deed is done, she seems to lose all her purpose in life. She no longer has something to achieve or someone to look up to. Her only outlet from such a life is death, which she attains by committing suicide. And true to the manner in which she had lived, she is alone and secretive in the conduct of her death. She is found dead in the basement "curled on the floor around Lumb's dagger, her temple to the boards." The very instrument of her vengeance has become the means of her release. Death is indeed an escape for her, perhaps indicating a new life ahead of her for she now seems more peaceful, looking "quite comfortable in death,/And like a foetus asleep with crossed ankles." Death is probably preferable to the life of meaningless routine she had led so far.

The vicar's carefully prepared scheme that enabled him to win over all the women in the parish appears indeed ingenius. It was calculated to take in both the religiously devout, prim
and prudish Puritans, as well as the bored and indifferent stragglers or the wayward prodigals of the Christian community. The vicar's ideas of a new religion, a new fertility cult sound diabolical when Mrs. Evans explains it to her husband:

Mr Lumb has a new religion.
He is starting Christianity all over again,
right from the start.
He has persuaded all the women in the parish.
Only women can belong to it.
They are all in it and he makes love to them all,

Because a saviour
Is to be born in this village, and Mr Lumb
is to be the earthly father.
So all the women in the village
Must give him a child
Because nobody knows which one the saviour will be. (Gaudete, p. 113-14)

Under the guise of religious dedication, Lumb was able, with the help of this devilish and unprincipled plan, to gain the co-operation of all types of women, both young and old, rich and poor, prudish and licentious.

Pauline Hagen, the wife of Major Hagan, the first woman we come across in the narrative section of the poem, is a typical example of a bored and frustrated socialite. She is a thirty-five-year old woman, who, after fifteen years of marriage, has come to realize that the life she leads is barren and cold and therefore completely lacking in vitality. The gravel outside her house reflects the chaotic state of affairs, yet remains distanced from her problems by its sterility and indifference. The bleak landscape reflects the chilly emptiness of their life:
A leaf-bordered blankness
Like the suck of a precipice
Draws her along the bleak sweep of drive
Towards the white house. (Gaudete, p. 31)

The feverish hysteria within her is kept in check by these desolate surroundings. The heavily suppressed sensuousness in her is discovered by Lumb and it now demands release. It cannot be subdued or satiated easily and she has to turn to nature for solace:

The bunching breast-cry inside her shudders to be let out. She folds her arms tightly
Over this rending,
She bends low, her face closes more tightly.
Her moan barely reaches the nearest tree,
She is gouging the leaf-mould,
She is anointing her face with it.
She is wringing the bunched stems of squeaking spermy bluebells and anointing her face. (Gaudete, p. 32)

This obviously extreme sexual ecstasy can find no expression in her artificial surroundings. She is lonely and unsought. She cannot share her passions with anyone or communicate her feelings to others. Within the house there is no succour for her as even the rooms are distant and almost hostile to her:

Rooms retreat.
A march of right angles. Barren perspectives
Cluttered with artefacts in a cold shine,
Icebergs of taste, spacing and repose.
The rooms circle her slowly, like a malevolence.
She feels weirdly oppressed. (Gaudete, p. 32)

Like the rooms, she is also cold and barren. Though tastefully decorated and meticulously kept, they are not welcoming. Like them she is also separated from the vital core of existence, when confronted with a violent spectacle, she becomes numb and still. She is unmoved by the violent scene involving her husband
and the dog who attacks him and is beaten to death. The violent flashes of energy from the animal world are seen as if from a great distance: "As if it were all something behind the nearly unbreakable screen glass of a television/With the sound turned off" (Gaudete, p. 35). The dog's impassioned action and the equally violent reaction from her husband pass by with no response from her. She is so alienated from the vital universe that she is not affected by any manifestation of force or power.

Mrs. Holroyd, on the other hand, is full of earthy vigour, vivacious and energetic, she takes to Lumb out of this natural buoyancy, ecstatically enjoying his animal sexuality. She is the very essence of the country cocquette with her bubbling good humour, flirtations easy-going ways and healthy vigorous involvement in the business of living. She is well-endowed and voluptuously beautiful, a "fresh-faced abundant woman" (Gaudete, p. 47). She enjoys the luxuriating warmth of the sun and takes deep sensual pleasure in physically experiencing the various aspects of nature:

She squirms her toes, feeling inside her shoes the faint clammy cold of the dew, which will hide all day in the dense grass.
She turns her freckled face shallowly
In the doubtful sun
And watches through her eyelashes a dewball dangling its Colours, like an enormous ear-jewel, among the blades.
Closing her eyes
Concentrating on the sun's weight against her cheek,
She lets herself sink. (Gaudete, pp. 58-59)

She makes her enjoyment and occupation, even neglecting her toil-worn husband and leaving him to make his own tea and eat
a cold meal, while she sunbathes in the orchard. She is happy and drowsily contented with the pleasures of the natural world around her and suspends all thought of past or future in the joys of the moment. She surrenders herself to a life of languid pleasures and wants nothing to change.

Another person who has a close link with the world of nature is Mrs. Davies. A quaint old woman with unusual interests, she is nevertheless cordial and tolerant of her fellow human beings. Her submerged sexuality and frustration are reflected in her pampering of the snake, the Lawrentian symbol of male sexuality and libido. She feeds it with milk and "the caress of her endearments." By her affinity to the reptile, she is also in harmony with nature and the White Goddess. She has some form of communication with the adder and she associates herself closely with plants. Her connections with the plant world are described in rather mysterious terms by Hughes:

Mrs Davies is the real thing, it appears.
An old sunburned vixen, with a soft belly,
An over-ripe windfall apple
From some lichenous, crumbling lineage
Growing eccentrically sluttish among her potting sheds,
her seed-frame, her greenhouses, and her compost.
An aged, tatty, unearthed lily bulb
Which secretes some staggering gilded chalice.
A questionable flowerpot troll-woman, her hands half-earth. (Gaudete,p.92)

Though advancing in age, she is youthful in her vigour and enthusiasm for life. Her recommendation of the W.I to the squire's new wife is only part of her encouraging of the vital and the emotional. She surrenders to the vicar's ministrations
naturally and with unrestrained enjoyment. She is surprisingly young and beautiful when shed of the raiments of civilized society and has a "luminous face" which Felicity recognizes as "an infinite sexual flower" (Gaudete, p. 140). Her presence at the church is reassuring for the tense and worried Felicity, for she is warm in her welcome and genuinely good-natured.

Mrs Walsall, the pub-owner's wife is one of the loyal supporters who tenaciously adheres to Lumb's bidding. She is obviously in love with the vicar but clearly dissatisfied with herself and the present state of affairs. She knows she is ugly and that her chances of winning the vicar's love by means of her attractions are remote, for her

... starved Syrian face
Has the religious pallor, the blue-socketed eyes
Of a mediaeval portrait. (Gaudete, p. 54)

So the growing foetus within her is probably her only means of "dedicating herself, like a sacrifice to her great love." Yet he is jealous of Betty, who is obviously going to a rendezvous with the priest for she is a younger and more attractive competitor for his attentions. She endures the agonising pain of the realization with stoicism and resignation. The tortured agony of her suffering is evident even in her love-making:

Animal gurgles mangle in her throat
While her eyes, her whole face, toil
In the wake of a suffering
That has carried her beyond them.
Her head thrashes from side to side among small ferns and periwinkles. (Gaudete, p. 96)

Her tormented acceptance of the misery makes her a martyr to the vicar's cause. She is rendered incapable of thinking of anything
beyond the present or planning an alternative. She is grave and passionately intense in her responses to life and to persons.

There are several other women in the parish who are brought into the fold by means of the vicar's avowals of love and promises of marriage. The two daughters of Commander Estridge are seduced one after the other in this manner. He had earlier promised to run away to Australia with the elder daughter Janet. Later he professes love to the younger who reciprocates his affection and accepts his proposal despite her foreknowledge of her sister's involvement. She then hastens to enlighten her of the new developments which triggers off the catastrophe. The vicar has obviously succeeded in releasing a sensuous and creative spring within Jennifer which finds expression through her music which is now wild and uncontrolled:

The scherzo
Of Beethoven's piano sonata Opus 110
Is devouring itself, dragonish,
Scattering scales,
Havocking polished, interior glooms.
Trembling dusty ivy, escaping towards the sky
Through the wedding of apple blossom at the open French windows. (Gaudete, p. 41)

Observing his daughter playing this violently powerful sonata, Commander Estridge suddenly realizes that his "dream of beautiful daughters" has now materialized into a reality of nightmarish proportions which are beyond his understanding. The gentle beautiful girls have now become
Unmanageable and frightening.
Like leopard cubs suddenly full-grown, come into
their adult power and burdened with it.
Primaevai frames, charged with primaevai hungers
and primaevai beauty.
Those uncontrollable eyes, and organs of horrific
energy demanding satisfaction.

The emotional turbulence accentuates their physical beauty and
youthful attractiveness. Both the girls are naive enough to
believe in the vicar's declarations of love despite the obvious
implausibility of the situation. It is only when faced with
the physical fruit of their actions that they recognize their
folly and the impracticability of the circumstances that face
them. Due to the moral depravity involved, it is not possible
for them to receive social sanction. And marriage is far from
the vicar's scheme of life, for he worships a goddess whose
domain does not fall within the ordinary domestic routine. By
marrying, the vicar would only be destroying the divinity within
them, for, according to the tradition described by Robert Graves

The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the
perpetual 'other woman', and her part is difficult
indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more
than a few years, because the temptation to commit
suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's
and muse's heart.\textsuperscript{15}

Therefore the girls are trapped in an impossible situation from
which there is no escape except through death, to which Janet
takes recourse.

Felicity stands apart from the other women in Gaudete by
her genuine involvement in life and her active participation in
its various aspects. She is equally at home working with
Mrs. Davies' plants or keeping house for her grandfather. Though emotional and enthusiastic, she is not completely blind to reality or incapable of rational analysis. She is physically good-looking, "the most exotic thing in the nursery" (Gaudete, p. 91). She is independent and capable of introspection. She has a potential vitality, reflected in her physical appearance and behaviour:

She performs it a little, self-indulgently, with a flourish, as a leopard performs its frightening grace.

Her overlong upsweeping nose, her flat calf's eye, her wide reckless mouth, were her father's real ugliness. For the time being they compound her enigmatic triangular beauty.

Gypsy dark skin, intensifying into fierce wire hair. Lusty little moles on the upper lip, and on her cheek. (Gaudete, p. 91)

Her active nature and slender form add to the charm of her flowering youthfulness. She is confident and self-possessed as evident from her deportment. She holds a well-balanced outlook towards life. She is the only person who is able to see the two sides of the vicar clearly. She goes to attend the fateful meeting of the WI at the basement of the church following an impulsive emotional outburst. She is obviously an outsider there and loses all sense of time, place and reality as she is swept into the strange atmosphere prevailing the place. She has irregular and fleetingly lucid glimpses of the actual situation and a general foreboding with regard to the trend the events are to take. They leave her in a state alternating between terror and passive acceptance:
She understands she has become a hind. Her bowels coil and uncoil with fear.

She waits for whatever it is they are going to do to her. She knows she has lost her way finally. She catches and loses again the idea that Lumb will somehow bring her out of all this. She feels everything beginning to deepen again. She forgets who she is or where she is. (Gaudete, p. 145)

Despite all her efforts to retain her sanity and keep her reasoning faculty intact, she is carried away by the emotional onslaught on her senses and the tide of fanatic devotion carries her in its sway. Soon she is forced to identify herself with the role to which she is assigned, and she accepts that

Somehow she has become a goddess. She is now the sacred doll of a slow infinite solemnity. She knows she is a constellation very far off and cold moving through this burrow of smoke and faces. She knows she is burning plasma and infinitely tiny, that she and all these women are moving inside the body of an incandescent creature of love, that they are brightening, and that the crisis is close, they are the cells in the glands of an inconceivably huge and urgent love-animal and some final crisis of earth's life is now to be enacted Faithfully and selflessly by them all. (Gaudete, p. 142)

Soon she is made the symbol of the vicar's earthly failing, for it was she who was responsible for the vicar's decision to abandon his calling and run away with her to settle down to domesticity. So she is forced to partake in a ritualistic union which results in her murder by Maud as a part of Lumb's punishment for neglecting his calling. Sunken in their drugged stupor, the majority of the women are not even fully aware of her actions:

The fuddled women grope for what has happened and for what is being said but their brains are still in the music and nothing will separate. They receive Maud's words as the revelation of everything. (Gaudete, p. 147)
But Lumb is brought back to his rational self by the dreadful act. He makes an effort to undo the harm done, but Felicity has gone beyond all help. Her ritualistic killing marks the death of rationalism in the parish. The seething violence unleashed by the vicar and his followers can no longer be controlled and it has to take its toll and work out its fury completely before society can resume its functions in a normal and civilized manner.

To Hughes, the feminine represents the vital and creative forces of the universe. But when the women in the society themselves lack the Dionysian power, the whole civilization is moving towards deterioration. The only means of survival for the present generation is through religion and faith. It is women who keep religion alive by their perseverance and pious dedication. This view is expressed in the words of Old Smayle in the poem:

The church began with women,  
Through all those Roman persecutions it was kept going by women.  
The Roman Empire was converted by a woman.  
And now the whole thing's worn back down to its women.  
(Gaudete, p. 65)

But when religion is taken over by a male usurper as in the case of the present day Western civilization, the outcome is emotional sterility. In the words of Robert Graves:

What ails Christianity today is that it is not a religion squarely based on a single myth; it is a complex of juridical decisions made under political pressure in an ancient law-suit about religious rights between adherents of the Mother-goddess who was once supreme in the West, and those of the usurping Father-god. 16
In order to make survival possible, it is necessary for the predominating male to make peace with the primordial female creative power rather than allow her to wreak her vengeance upon a whole civilization. The women in Hughes poems reveal traces of the fallen female deity for they are unable to exert their creative power, and need masculine help even to identify it.
NOTES


5 Ibid., p. 449.


7 Emily Dickinson, "Apparently with no surprise" (1624).


16 Ibid., p. 468.