CHAPTER FIVE

Ted Hughes

Everywhere the dust is in power
Then whose
Are these
Eyes,
eyes and
Dance of wants,
Of offering?
Sun and moon, death and death,
Grass and stones, their quick
peoples, and the bright particles
Death and death and death-

(Wodwo 151)
Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was born in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, in 1930. Hughes had an opportunity to experience the beautiful landscapes, Rock Mountains and the moors of Yorkshire. His nature poems reflect the omnipresent power of nature. He studied Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge which became determinant factors and the bases in his literary and mythological studies.


Ted Hughes was a restless and hard working writer. The other ability of Hughes is his precise observation of nature. Hughes adapts this skill from Lawrence’s “way of seeing”. Skillfully he watched the reality of the nature and the animal life. His photographic observation of nature affirms his preoccupation with the energy of life in nature and animals as the theme for most of his poems. He is famous for his animal poems, the theme which brings the word “violence”, a notorious name to him. Hughes says “My poems are not about violence but vitality. Animals are not violent they’re so much more completely controlled than men” (Gifford and Roberts 13). While Dyson writes:

For Ted Hughes power and violence go together; his own dark gods are makers of the tiger, not the lamb. He is fascinated by violence of all kinds, in love and in hatred, in the jungle and the arena, in battle, murder
and sudden death. Violence, for him, is the occasion not for reflection, but for being; it is a guarantee of energy, of life, and most so, paradoxically, when it knows itself in moments of captivity, pain or death. ("Ted Hughes," 220)

Hughes’ role in introducing Absentist poetry into literature of 1960s, if not more than the other previous Absentist poets, is not less either. His masterpiece Wodwo (1967) and the subsequent volume Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow (1970) stand for the best works of Absentist poetry. The characters of these two books such as the Crow and Wodwo are remarkably in proportion to the theme of absentism and absurdity. In these two books he develops “a distinctive imaginative world” of animals and nature.

Hughes in the animal poems brings out a vivid imagery, using original phrases and effective combination of words. He uses different techniques, in a perfectly realistic description of animals and nature; also in his poetry he creates myths about animals. The perfect example is the mytho-absentist poems of Crow. He writes in a way that we forget ourselves, and our identity. He makes us feel inferior or reduces to that of an inhuman creature.

The Influence of other writers on Ted Hughes

Some of Hughes’s earlier works echo his previous poets such as Dylan Thomas, Wilfred Owen, D.H. Lawrence, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot.

W. B. Yeats is one of the great influential figures of Modernism for his latter generation. His work on Irish mythology and ritual fascinated Ted Hughes, especially his poem “The Second Coming” which is a celebration of power. The symbol in “The Second Coming” is a monster with an animal body which stands for power along with the human’s head which stands for the mind. This combination of physical power and
thinking mind create a destructive potential. Hughes in his imaginative nature poems and animal poems comes closer to the same type of symbols in Yeats’s poem, but with more harshness, anger and uncontrolled energy. The difference between Hughes’s and Yeats’s animo-anthropo poems comes from this point that Yeats has control over his symbols. In a poem such as “The Second Coming”, the poet creates a symbol and controls it, as he already knows the aim of the symbol. For example, in the last line of the poem “The Second Coming”, “toward Bethlehem”, is the direction for the symbol. The statement that the hero made makes the poem a visionary, which guaranties hope for the future. Hughes is completely drowned in the absence of destiny. His symbols; “Crow”, “Wodwo” and “Gog”, are wanderers; they suffer in the absence of their destination. In their quest ‘to become’, they lose what they have.

Hughes says that: ‘Behind Yeats’ poem is the upsurge that is still producing our modern chaos-the explosion against civilization itself, the oppressive deadness of civilization, the spiritless materialism of it, the stupidity of it” (Faas, “Hughes,” 9). Thematically Hughes is under the influence of Yeats. He follows the same prophecy of Yeats about the destructive movement of human life: he says “Thing looked like falling apart” (Crow 57). In this regard Ted Hughes is an apocalyptic poet. But Hughes separated his way from Yeats.

His symbols become enrage and anguish of energy which goes beyond Yeats’ destructive symbols. His animal poems are full of absence, they are ultimate absence acid, which is flung about indiscriminately and also restraint. In his poems, Hughes connects three different energies together: first, the energy of Mother earth and pure nature like the energy of rain, wind, water etc., second, the energy of animals and their will to live, such as hawk, jaguar, and pike. The last energy is the fierce energy of Man and his will to power and violence. When these three bases of nature and universe
contact each other, they go beyond any control. Hughes believes that religion and mythology are the only powers which can control these energies especially the energy of man. The modern society suffers from the absence of religions and rituals. The violence that Hughes deals with is the burst of these energies. They need to be under control. When energies can not be controlled they become destructive. In Egbert Faas’ interview with Hughes, Hughes accepts that, the solution of violence lies in the new form of mythology.

Any form of violence- any form of vehement activity- invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. … If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control- rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one (200).

The energy of animals in Hughes’s poetry is sometimes negative and scary. D.H. Lawrence was a fertile growing point for Ted Hughes’s regard to the animal poems. Animal themes are their favourite subject. Yet Hughes takes a new direction to animal theme.

Lawrence’s animal poems are entirely in another realm. While Lawrence’s animals are similar to human beings, for Hughes human beings are similar to animals. They are so similar to animals that in his poetry it is very rare to find human beings; man transforms into animals so animals represent man. Lawrence still loves human beings unlike Hughes who lost interest in man, so he exposes his readers to the danger of animals in his poems, but Lawrence only shows the situation to the reader. For Lawrence nature is sacred and pure and human beings are still part of it, for Hughes it is hostile towards
human being and they are separated from it. Hughes writes about the pain and the woe of animals but Lawrence portrays animal’s joy.

Richard Webster finds out that Hughes and Lawrence both are the “intellectual[s] in rebellion against [their] own rationalism” (38). That is the reason that Hughes reduces man to the realm of the instinct of the animals. Their differences with regard to animals comes from the key point that “Lawrence has a much greater respect for the integrity and independence of the animals he writes about” rather than Hughes who makes animal-man, “half-man and half-animal”, a satyr, a being full of absence. Hughes in some of his poems unites the animal integrity with human identity to make a new immortal symbol beyond the absence, like the meta-poem of “The-Thought-Fox” which is a symbol of human intellect along with animal instinct in the form of a poem. “The fox is the poem, and the poem is the fox. ‘And I suppose,’ Ted Hughes has written, ‘that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them’” (Webster 37). The fox becomes part of the identity and integrity of the poet and the poem, it does not exist separately. For Lawrence animals are ‘other’, he brings their otherness to the anthropomorphic creature. Michael Bell writes that:

In comparison, Hughes’s remarkable poems on animals are more anthropomorphic because of their melodramatic insistence on the inhuman. This is reflected in their formal intensity whereas Lawrence’s apparently loose and autobiographical manner, while usually achieving a lesser concentration, makes the humanising viewpoint a dramatic aspect of the poem (94).

The other major difference between Hughes and Lawrence’s animal poems according to Calvin Bedient related to their contradiction of “the will to live”. The will to live was
the favourite topic for Hughes unless Lawrence’s animal poems which never deal with this issue.

G.M. Hopkins (1844-1889) writes about animals also however, he had a marvelous idea about animals. He was a religious poet; he saw God and Christ in all universe and animals. Through admiring animals’ beauty, he admires God. He believes that God is present in the soul of every individual either human or animal. Animals in Hopkins’s poetry represent natural beauty.

Ted Hughes as a Nihilist Poet

Hughes’ absentist poems are nihilist. Death, violent force to life, harsh nature of animals and nature are his favourite themes. As a child he experienced the Second World War, and from his father’s memories he knew about the War. All these dark experiences from war and death lead him to *Wodwo* (1967) and *Crow: From the Songs and Life of the Crow* (1970), the most pessimistic, absentist and nihilist poems in modern poetry. “Implicit in these experiences was a sense of the inadequacy of humanism, the bankruptcy of the old symbols, and a gradual recognition of the bankruptcy of the old forms” (Schmidt 384) But Hughes was not pessimistic from beginning. In the poems of *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) he is eager to relish life and survival in a way that sometimes it comes closer to violence. But, what he celebrates in this book is “the victor”, the will to live, not “war” and violence. This feeling in his second book *Lupercal* (1960) changes to something which scares and dreads the readers in a poem such as “Ghost Crabs” which is a nightmarish poem: “At nightfall, as the sea darkens, / A depth darkness thickens, mustering from the gulfs and the submarine badlands, / To the sea’s edge” (*Wodwo* 21).
The crabs, the symbol for ghost/evil and death emerge from the sea. Then sea becomes a symbol for death, which is against the traditional theory of sea as a source of rebirth and regeneration, “They emerge / An invisible disgorging of the sea’s cold” (21). The poet compares the crabs with the soldiers of war; “Like a packed trench of helmets”, men are helpless against them, and “Our walk our bodies, are no problem to them” (21). These crabs are not the actual crabs but the ghosts, the shadows around us, from the sea of disappointment; “We cannot see them or turn our mind’s from them” since they live in our mind. They “own[ed] this world”, they owned us.

Press through our nothingness where we sprawl on beds,
Or sit in our rooms. Our dreams are ruffled maybe.
Or we jerk awake to the world of our possessions
With a gasp, in a sweat burst, brains jamming blind
Into the bulb-light. (Wodwo 21)

The theme of death is a significant subject in Wodwo poems. Gifford and Roberts in their critical study of Hughes’ poetry assert that: “Hughes created a modern elegiac language; in [these] poem[s] he is striving to express the experience of loss within a perception of the world that nearly resembles a vacuum. The vacuum is perhaps created by the loss- the utilities are abandoned and therefore absurd because of the death”. (95) This vacuum is the same absence in the essence of life and death.

Absence is an inevitable fact in Hughes’s poetry. His poetry is a synthesis of death and absurdity as measurements of absence. Hughes very powerfully portrays the conditions of the world of the absentist era, in the “abandoned world” which is deficient. Michael Schmidt talks about this vacuum from another point of view. He believes that the vacuum or the absences come from too much freedom. The moods of his poems are gloomy and disappointing. “His most recent verse implies a recantation of materialism
and its world of death, suffering and woe, a conscious abandonment of ‘fate’, even if, in halting and questioning one’s destiny, one may be subject to profound loss. The man born running across an endless desert at last manages to arrest himself, wrenching himself free by act of will. Free for what?” (391).

In his absentist poems of Wodwo (1967), Hughes contrasts death and nothingness with life and survival, in Crow (1970) he contrasts night and darkness to the day and brightness. What results from these comparisons is the domination of darkness over light and day; therefore in his poems, life and brightness are equal to death and nothingness. Gifford and Roberts point out that “Death … is for Hughes the type of the inescapable. …death, resolutely contemplated, is the ultimate type of that unity of the inner self and ‘external’ nature which he attempts to express in his poems celebrating intense life” (100). But, his poems with the dominant theme of death have more tendencies toward nihilism than the “unity” with the “external nature”. “Heptonstall” is one of those poems; “Hughes associates his home village Heptonstall (where Sylvia Plath was buried) with a center of his pessimistic universe and a sound of decaying death. The village, for Hughes, represents one of inescapable gloom and tears of despair” (Madhukumar 5).

Black village of gravestones.
The hill’s collapsed skull
Whose dreams die back
Where they were born.

Skull of a sheep
Whose meat melts
Under its own rafters.
Only the flies leave it. (Wodwo 165)

The “black village of gravestones” represents the scenes of concentration camps of the Second World War, the scenes from the many massacres and mass graves which happen everywhere even in our decade around the world.

Skull of a bird,

The great geographies

Drained to sutures

Of cracked windowsills. (Wodwo 165)

The collection Crow exemplifies portrayal of “the horror of creation”. The loneliness of the characters in Wodwo and Crow is another key point for Hughes’s Nihilism. He is preoccupied with the subject of loneliness and nothingness and there is no way out. He writes about the “absolute egotism of survival” as the will to live. Still it can not save man from his loneliness. Bedient says:

The will to live might seem the first and healthiest of subjects; in fact it is almost the last and most morbid. Men come to it after the other subjects have failed. It is the last stop—waterless, exposed—before nothingness. Civilization blows off, love and utopia evaporate, the interest the human mind takes in its own creations washes out, and there, its incisors bared, stands life, daring you to praise it. (Bedient, Eight 95)

Apart from the loneliness his heroes are monsters of destruction, Hawk tears off the heads, Wodwo is half-man and half-animal and finally Crow is a black bird of absurdity. They are the characters of nihilist poetry which stripped life from every meaning.
Hughes is a total nihilist. To keep death from drawing a black line and adding every effort up to zero is, for him, the whole sum of life. It is all a struggle against debit; the credit side is a blank.

Hughes is a nihilist on the scuffling, muscled side of nothingness, the opposite kind from, say, Philip Larkin, who has long since become a wise ghost. … Hughes is in the midst of the battle, relishing its proof of the will not to die- the correct name of the will to live. Where Larkin has taken ‘the grave’s part’ Hughes is terrified of ‘the earth’s mouth’. (Eight 101)

Ted Hughes as an Existentialist Poet

The absentist crow-man is a helpless creature out of “the compulsion of instinct”. The crow is the same character such as roosting hawk or the jaguar in the pervious books. While the hawk and the jaguar are heroes, the crow is a negative, an absurd and evil hero. He is the real Black Beast which he searches for. The style of such a book as Bedient says, unless “the style of Lupercal [which] is an attack of beauty on nihilism… is the croak of nihilism itself” (114). In “Owl’s Song”, it is significant that a lonely owl sings the song of the night of humanity. The owl’s song is the song of the absence of man. Owl is the bird of night and what he sings is the sad song of humanity.

He sang
How the swan blanched forever
How the wolf threw away its telltale heart
And the stars dropped their pretence
The air gave up appearances
Water went deliberately numb
The rock surrendered its last hope
And cold died beyond knowledge (Crow 46)

Man has lost everything and has “nothing more to lose”’ is the absentist manifesto of Hughes. Everything is absent.

Then sat still with fear
Seeing the clawtrack of star
Hearing the wingbeat of rock
And his own singing (Crow 46)

“The final tree lines clearly reflect the movement of the owl’s consciousness, singing himself into a state of non-illusion and then frightened by his experience of a world that he has defensively filled with himself” (Gifford and Roberts 108). Hughes substitutes the Crow with a new bird of darkness of night a singing owl. Rosenthal and Gall believe that the pronoun “he” of the poem is Ted Hughes himself.

“Crow Tyrannosaurus” is not the tyranny of crow but man. The title “Crow Tyrannosaurus” is an irony because in this poem crow achieves the sublime he was searching for, “he tries to become the light while man becomes an abattoir of innocents. This poem refers to “The Hawk in the Rain”, while hawk is in his highest position, the man drowns in his inferior life which is clay ploughland and the dogged grave. The poem is about death and how the corpse gets eaten by insects. The narrator says:

Even man he was a walking
Abattoir
Of innocents
His brain incinerating their outcry.

Crow thought ‘Alas
Alas ought I
To stop eating
And try to become the light? (Crow 19)

The crow hates himself when he comes to know about human voracity and eating other creatures. “Crow Tyrannosaurus”, reduces human beings to “a walking / abattoir / of innocents” and men with angst. In this poem the crow “represents human consciousness as an absence of being, as fear of its own nothingness. He returns to his beginnings in his author’s anxieties” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 24).

But his eyes saw a grub. And his head, trapsprung, stabbed.

And he listened
And he heard
Weeping
Grubs grubs He stabbed he stabbed
Weeping
Weeping
Weeping he walked and stabbed
Thus came the eye’s
roundness
the ear’s
deafness. (Crow 20)

The lament of the crow symbolizes a “being thrown into the world; Angst, the quailing of the mind when it learns it is not the world; inauthenticity, the futile and febrile denial that death is the inmost potential of being” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 24).

The other Existential poem of Hughes in the Collection of Crow is “Crow’s Never Fails”. The title itself is an irony because the crow-man of the collection is a failed and
absent man. This poem questions man about his inauthenticity and his being thrown into this world, “His prison is the earth” (Crow 38). Man has no other choice except to live with his pain, “how can he fly from his feathers?” (38). The feathers stand for all his belonging which can not leave them behind.

Crow, feeling his brain slip,

Finds his every feather the fossil of a murder.

Who murdered all these?
These living dead, that root in his nerves and his blood
Till he is visibly black?

How can he fly from his feathers?
And why have they homed on him?

Is he the archive of their accusations?
Or their ghostly purpose, their pining vengeance?
Or their unforgiven prisoner?

He cannot be forgiven.

His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction,
Trying to remember his crimes

Heavily he flies. (Crow 38)
Crow laments painfully about his perplexed nature and being. In this poem Crow represents the better side of the human, which is always absent. Crow is more conscious so “we forget Crow is a crow- much as we forget Othello is Black- until his supposed nature overcomes his will, and he is brutally reduced to himself” (Schmidt 391).

All Life Suffers in the Absentist era Except Nature which is Real. (Nature poems)

The theme of nature in poetry is not a new topic. The Romantic poets and the Classical poets were engaged with nature and its different aspects too. While the great poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Hopkins and even modern poet T.S. Eliot were mesmerized by the divine spirit of nature, a poet like Ted Hughes is fascinated by two aspects of nature; the first is the wild inhuman and savage will to live in nature. He introduces the most common fundamentals of nature as ‘wild’, ‘fierce’, ‘untamed’ and ‘cruel’ in his poetry. The second is the human beings who are separated from nature and the mother earth. “Hughes’s life and work were centred on a deep and religious attachment to natural world, and a belief that the real self of a human being is not the rational intellect but the life we share with other creatures. This, to him, was the realm of the sacred, with which he believed western civilization had disastrously lost contact” (Roberts 7). In Hughes’s nature poems, he attacks the “scientific rationalism” of modern man so in his poems human beings are absent. Man is not a favourite topic for Hughes. Whenever he talks about human beings he portrays them as weak, wounded, foolish dead or not at all present. But one needs to know that Hughes is not a misanthropic poet, rather a poet sensitive to the present modern life of man. Through his animals and nature imagery he endeavours to depict how man forgets himself in the
age of machine. He wants to show the lack of balance between man’s head and body, between his intellect and his instinct.

One has to bear in mind that Hughes is a great observer of nature. He is aware of the positive and tranquil elements of nature too. But as an absentist poet of post-World Wars he writes more about the dark side of the nature, which is ugly, harsh, and horrific. Mankind is all lies and fabrication, but nature is real and authentic. The reality of nature is hidden in its survival after any destruction; Nature is so vast and deep, while human and animal’s lives are so limited and short. The pure power is the will to live. The lies of mankind are his enthusiastic will for power, his dishonesty with himself.

Hughes looks at nature in wonder just as a new born’s first experience of the world outside. He brings this power of observation in the vivid imagery and diction of his poems. Hughes is famous for his graphic descriptions, and the power of his language is what brings so real natural scenery onto the page.

A. E. Dyson argues that Hughes wants to reconcile “human vision with the energies, powers, presences” of the non-human world. He tries to recognize these energies and powers in both man and nature. He further observes:

Hughes is also concerned to discover whether negotiations are possible between man and Nature, that is between man and his Creator, and, if so, why they have so completely collapsed in our time and what the consequences of this collapse have been and may yet be. The destructiveness of Nature is so clearly seen and deeply felt that it seems in many of the poems in Wodwo and Crow that negotiation is impossible’ . . . (Three 130)
Absentism is an aesthetic study of the deficiency of these negotiations between man and nature, and between man and man. Nature by itself is so perfect and real. Hughes prefers the reality of nature which includes its will to live to the absurdity of human life. In his nature poems what is absent is human being itself. Human being who is completely separated from nature is not anymore part of nature but a sick and weak portion of nature. The nature and animal poems also deal with the story of the weakness of mankind. In these types of poems Hughes juxtaposes two ideas, the reality and fact in the animo-centric poems which stand against the imagination and abstract of anthropo-centric poems. In Hughes’s absentist poetry “nature is spare” because “nature at least, is real; hook, the screech, are real” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 23).

The following poems attempt to bring the vitality of nature in contrast to the absurdity and absence of human life.

In his nature poems the most significant theme is the element of the reality of the will to live. The poem like “The Hawk in the Rain” from the Collection with the same title depicts the infinitesimal nature of man in the vastness of nature. In the poem “Wind”, “The wind flung a magpie away and a black / Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly” (40). The image of bending the iron bar for the flight of gull in the rain is a powerful image, because only a human can “bend”. Implicitly he mentions the human being as weak as opposed to the elements of nature. The last stanza of the poem depicts another destructive power of nature;

Now deep
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons. (Hawk 40)

The house and the iron bar are manmade objects, which in the vicious power of rain and wind easily can be destroyed. Nothing can stand against nature’s fury. The poem is a combination of two elements of the strength of nature in contrast to the tremulousness and fragility of man. Together they create the violent images in the poem; “at any second to bang and vanish with a flap”. The theme of the “Wind” is in contrast with some poems such as “Pike” and “The Blue Moses”, where their theme is “stillness”. But as Gifford and Roberts say: “it is useful to isolate that quality of mind by looking at its exercise in a poem whose subject is the opposite of stillness” (37).

“October Dawn” is another nature poem, which is one of the apocalyptic poems. It deals with the beginning of autumn and that of winter. The whole poem is based on the dream of a glass of wine and about the beginning of the cold season. A half glass of wine is left out on the lawn on an October night, and a thin layer of ice formed on its surface.

A glass half full of wine left out

To the dark heaven all night, by dawn
Has dreamed a premonition

Of ice across its eye as if

The ice-age had begun its heave. (Hawk 41)

Hughes very elegantly brings this actual fact as a prophecy of what is going to come. In the dream of the glass of wine which is about returning of the ice-age, he says that: “Ice
Has got its spearhead into place”. Everything is covered by ice and snow as if the world had gone back to the time of Mammoths, and pre-historical beasts.

Then, sound by sight

Will Mammoth and Sabre-tooth celebrate

Reunion while a fist of cold

Squeezes the fire at the core of the world,

Squeezes the fire at the core of the heart,

And now it is about to start.  (Hawk 41)

The prophecy portrays a horrible end for the human being. The ice-age will destroy mankind and the world he has built; it kills the fire in the heart of man. Implicitly “October Dawn”, is a prophesy about the end of the world, when coldness of hearts kills the affection in mankind. It is not only the actual winter in nature, but also “October Dawn” could be a symbol for coldness and darkness of human mind over him and nature because the wildness of man “Squeezes the fire at the core of the world”. “October Dawn” is the harsh reality of nature. It is frightening and is a nightmarish experience for Man.

“November”, the heavy rain and the intense coldness of the month of November along with the endurance of the tramp who is homeless, are the themes of this poem. The poet-narrator explains November as “the month of the drowned dog”. The rain is so much that “the land / was sodden as the bed of an ancient lake”. In such a rain, trees look like iron, and there is no bird anywhere. In rain “the hill’s hanging silence”, and the fields seemed to be “jumping and smoking”, and “the thrones quivered”. The depiction of a tramp is graphic in the following lines:
In a let of the ditch a tramp was bundled asleep;
Face tucked down into beard, drawn in
Under its hair like a hedgehog’s. I took him for dead,

But his stillness separated from the death
Of the rotting grass and the ground.  (Lupercal 49)

Hughes’s powerful articulation shows the bitter endurance of human being in facing the cruel reality of nature. The “beggar figure in [this poem] is a humiliated sense of human loss, of a falling off from a previous exalted state, that justifies the hostile, death-wielding tone of the books” (Dyson, Three 128).

In “November”, the poet appreciates the endurance of the tramp in the harsh weather. Although, the tramp is able to tolerate the coldness and the rain still the human being is weak compared with nature. To cover the frailty of the tramp, the poet unites him with mother-earth.

The tramp becomes part of nature. The narrator is surprised how he can bear the rainy night, “I thought what strong trust / Slept in him”.

Some still had their shape,

Had their pride with it; hung, chins on chests,

Patient to outwait these worst days that beat

Their crowns bare and dripped from their feet. (Lupercal 50)

When the tramp unites with nature, he is safe from death as other animals are in this last stanza. The poet celebrates the pride of life and stands on the side of life which is the winner.
Absentism and the realm of animals (animal poems)

The menagerie of Hughes with the Hawk, the jaguar, the pike, the shark, etc. is a place where Hughes challenges modern man. His animal poems suggest the degradation of the values of man. The element of violence/horror/terror in the animal poems of Hughes throws light on the dark side of mankind. Hughes does not bring man directly, but reduces him to the level of animal and mere instinct. Animals are symbols to show the dreadful dimensions of mankind. Thus, they become the significant elements for Hughes to write about the absence in the core of human mind and human heart. The ‘law of the survival of the fittest’, Darwin’s famous theory dominates the animal poems of Hughes. While Hughes’s animal poems are symbols for human life, he implicitly discusses Social Darwinianism. Dyson observes:

No poet of the past has quite managed to ‘internalize’ the murderousness of nature through such brilliantly objective means, and with such economy, as Hughes in poems like… ‘Hawk Roosting’ … ‘Thrushes’, and ‘Pike’. … he has the gift of presenting image and thought in a context of hurtling action; there is a strong narrative and dramatic element in all his projections, and the pacing is of the varied, shifting kind employed by skilled narrator impatient of any description or comment that is in any way inert. (Dyson, Three 125)

Hughes’s animal poems are from different collections. The significant poems which are discussed in this part are “The Hawk in the Rain”, “The Thought-Fox”, “The Jaguar”, “Hawk Roosting”, and “Pike”.

“The Hawk in the Rain” is from a collection bearing the same title (1957). It portrays the power of animal to adjust to harsh nature in contrast with man. The poet-narrator struggles on a rainy day in mud, and is completely disappointed;
I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth’s mouth,
From clay that clutched my each step to the ankle
With the habit of the dogged grave,   (Hawk 11)

The first line of the poem, “I drown”, is a manifestation of dethroning man from dignity to inferiority. The narrator drowned in the earthly life, the earth’s mouth swallows man little by little. The speaker describes his environment as “the dogged grave”. Man lacks the power of the hawk, its strength and steadiness. Man not only suffers from the weakness of his body, but also suffers from the fragility of the mind. What defeats him is not the physical shortcoming, but his disappointment in difficult moments. “The Hawk in the Rain” declares an important point about man; “to be human is to start out behind the animals, like a one-legged man in a race” (Bedient, Eight 98). The narrator confesses his weakness compared to the hawk. He says

… the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.
While banging wind kills these stubborn hedges.   (Hawk 11)

Bedient points out that Hughes in this poem “places man both literally and vitally below the hawk” (Eight 97), because man is prominently absent in Hughes Poetry. Throughout the entire poem, in the comparison between man and hawk, one finds the ability of the hawk to adjust to nature. For Ted Hughes the ability of mind for thinking, in human beings makes them incapacitated beings in many situations. Man can think; he can also doubt; he can be disappointed so as to stop working. This is what Hughes
shows as the limitation of mankind. Bedient compares the human mind to the “missing leg, an ache where the amputated part had been?” (Eight 98). Animals have less mind but more energy, and pure instinct they are full of action and the will to live. Animals are closer to nature and reality than human beings. They are what they are, nothing is absent in animals.

“The Thought-Fox” is Hughes’s first animal poem in The Hawk in the Rain. As against other animal poems, it is not merely about an animal but the activity of the mind of man too. “The Thought-Fox” is about the instinct of an animal in the form of a fox, along with the ability of man to think and his intellect, here the process of writing a poem takes place by the combination of these two elements; the instinct and the intellect. Hughes, the master of language and diction, uses animal imagery as an abstract idea. Fox stands for the first thought or idea of a poem. The poet tries to catch this untamed thought and tames it, and writes it down on paper. The poet takes his prey in the cage of words to show it to us. “The poem embodies an abstraction, suggested by the title: a thought coming to life on the printed page, like a wild beast invading the speaker’s mind” (Dyson, Three 123).

The beautiful play of the darkness of the night which is the setting of the poem represents the unconscious and deep level of the poet’s mind.

I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:

Something else is alive

Beside the clock’s loneliness

And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:

Something more near
Though deeper within darkness

Is entering the loneliness: *(Hawk 14)*

The idea of the poem is like a sparkle which comes in a moment. Hughes portrays it as a fox which is very fast and quick, it comes from the realm of the dark unconscious mind of the poet: “Two eyes serve a movement, that now / And again now, and now and now / Sets neat prints into the snow” *(Hawk 14)*.

Snow is the conscious mind and also the whiteness of the page; the loneliness of the poet, the silence of the nocturnal world and the poet’s concentration are essentially required for a thought-fox to appear on the page.

Across clearings, an eye,

A widening deepening greenness,

Brilliantly, concentratedly,

Coming about its own business *(Hawk 14)*

In “The Thought-Fox”, the poet is possessed by his thought which is like a fox. It comes “about its own business / Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox / It enters the dark hole of the head” *(Hawk 14)*. The response of absentism to this poem is the lack of the balance of the intellect and thought of man with the instinct of the animal side. There is a growing tendency to regard instinct rather than intellect in Human’s modern life.

“The Jaguar” is another animal poem from the collection *The Hawk in the Rain*. The extraordinary power of the jaguar, its energy, agility and fiercer temper has fascinated the poet. In comparison with other animals in the zoo such as: apes, tigers, lions and boas, the jaguar is very active and energetic although the jaguar is caged in the zoo, its spirit is free.

As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom-
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,

More than to the visionary his cell:

His stride is wildernesses of freedom: (Hawk 12)

The jaguar stands for the untamed will and instinct which can not be controlled by the human’s prison. Hughes selects an animal as a symbol because compared with human beings they are full of energy and life. The jaguar in the cage is freer than humans outside the cage. As an animal a jaguar follows his unconditional will. The contemplation, intellect and the imagination of a man as mentioned in “The Thought-Fox” they need to be tamed and controlled, otherwise they can turn the world a “wildernesses of freedom” and a cage for him. But, animals are free from this dark hole inside the human mind. The poem is a celebration of the instinct in animals “By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear- / He spins from the bars, but there’s no cage to him”. The last two lines are the manifestation of this idea that the instinct will be the winner “The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel. / Over the cage floor the horizons come”.

At the same time in this poem animals are in a cage, they are imprisoned by humans. Very ironically what man is scared of in animals is actually inherent in him. The poem suggests the failure of man to achieve control over his beastly side of himself. The animal instinct in man manifests in violence. The last two lines of the poem is the dream of man to achieve power. Hughes in his interview with Egbert Faas about Jaguar says that Jaguar is “a symbol of man’s baser nature shoved down into the id and
growing cannibal murderous with deprivation... he is a precise historical symbol to the bloody-minded Aztecs and so on. Or he is simply a demon. ... a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy.” (199).

“Hawk Roosting” is one of the significant poems in Lupercal (1960). The narrator “I” of the poem, in contrast with many other animal poems, is the hawk itself. The poem is in the form of a soliloquy in the voice of a human being in power. A.E. Dyson divides the poems of power and violence, into two types; one is the poet “wholly identified with some moment of power and violence, and vicariously elated” and the other, the poet stands aside and only portraits the moment of power but “remains a human and time-bound intelligence outside the experience, aware of the unbridgeable gulf between symbol and fact, eternity and time” (“Ted Hughes,” 222). Thus, the “Hawk Roosting” is more absentist poem than “The Hawk in the Rain”; in the former the absence of humanity leads us to the tyrannical force of power, in the later man is conscious of himself as a man with the limitation of power, even at the end the hawk “in his own time meets the weather / coming the wrong way”. Both hawk and man overcome the harsh nature.

The hawk, here as a single minded creature speaks in the position of power and with a sense of authority and confidence.

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

Inaction, no falsifying dream

Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat. (Lupercal 26)

The hawk closed his eyes and is passive so what he tells can be a dream, but immediately he says “no falsifying dream”. He assumes himself as the centre of the world and says that “the high trees”, “the air’s buoyancy”, “the sun’s ray” and the
entire universe all are for my convenience. He is very proud of himself; he thinks: “It took the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather”. Thus, according to him he is an important creature, he says: “I hold Creation in my foot // I kill where I please because it is all mine”. He owns the whole creation, what he will do with them, tears off heads, flies “direct / Through the bones of the living”. In his highest position of the power, he is the distributor of death, nothing can stop him “No arguments”, and even he claims that: “The sun is behind me. / Nothing has changed since I began. // I am going to keep thing like this.” (Lupercal 26)

The pronoun “I” is repeated many times in the poem. It depicts the self-centeredness and the egoism of the hawk, the hawk depicts violence and brutality in these lines:

    Now I hold Creation in my foot

                        ........................................

    I kill where I please because it is all mine.

                        ........................................

    Nothing has changed since I began.

                        ........................................

    My eye has permitted no change.

                        ........................................

    I am going to keep thing like this. (Lupercal 26)
These lines depict the destructive will for power in the Hawk which is a symbol for human's ferocity. Violence is the fruit of tyrant power, it becomes the rule of human; it is the regulation of nature and animal. In fact, a hawk is just a predatory bird, and he is weak compared to other predators. Hughes in his poems gives an ultimate power to the dehumanized character. The reality is that what he explains about the hawk is nothing, but a human sense of power and authority. “Hughes’s comment in the poem presents mankind as more horrific than his hawk. The poem’s tonal cadences and almost manic monosyllables indicate that this portrayal is self-delusory, and that the hawk’s commentary has a relevance to ‘civilized’ mankind’s ‘sophistry’ and ‘manners’ which normalized and sanction similar behaviour” (Elkin 15-16).

“Pike” thematically looks like “Hawk Roosting”. It is the story of true reality in nature. Pike is not only a portrait of the pure nature, but also a portrait of what critics in “Hawk Roosting” name, ‘Nature think’. What nature thinks about is the law of power. Whoever has more power, will survive. It seems Hughes in his animal poems follows the ‘law of the survival of the fittest’. The cannibalistic Pike is a killer “from the egg” as human beings are killers from the womb. Neither animals nor human beings, “they spare nobody”. The narrator of the poem explains the destructive instinct of the pike.

The Jaws’ hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date;
A life subdued to its instrument;
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals. (Lupercal 56)

Killing is the most essential and instinct factor to Pike, even they eat one another, and the benefit rules their life. The narrator- poet brings his personal observation;

Three we kept behind the glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: fed fry to them

Suddenly there were two. Finally one. (Lupercal 56)

To satisfy their hunger, pikes just kill and eat. The eye witness narrates his fishing at night when he finds a big pike in a big pond. He explains that: “Stilled legendary depth:
/ It was as deep as England” (Lupercal 57). The pike is so giant like, “too immense to stir, so immense and old”. The last stanza shows the horror of such killer pikes.

Owls hushing the floating woods

Frail on my ear against the dream

Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed,

That rose slowly towards me, watching. (Lupercal 57)

“Pike” is a poem of brutality and wilderness. The cruelty and rage to kill in animals is related to their basic instinct. The cruelty and unsatisfied hunger of Pike which Hughes shows in this poem about animals is quite natural but in human being it is very cruel, ugly and immoral. If a human being acts like an animal, he lacks the balance between the intellect and the instinct. “Hawk Roosting” and “Pike”, are the celebrations of the domination of ‘demonic forces’, in nature specially in human life. Roger Caldwell points out that:

What we are presented with is a conservative ideology, holding that with the decay of custom, tradition, ritual and religious belief that is the consequence of the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, modern man has become one-sidedly ratiocinative at the cost of suppressing his instinctual nature and losing his awareness of eternal truths. Poetry as a consequence must return this stunted creature to the rhythms of the natural world, to the awareness of the primal being he has lost, and set
him free from the shackles of shallow rationalism and technological falsity. (120)

Bedient finds out that Hughes’s animal poems are of non-human realm they are free from absence. Hughes shows the superiority of animals which is “their lack of self-consciousness, of the sickness of the mind. No hesitation, no remorse, a mind all reflex, streamlined as a trigger – it began to look like the state before the fall” (Eight 96).

‘There is no escape except into death’ (War poems)

Absentist poetry always has been obsessed with the tragic aspects of war. War is the result of human beings will for violence. Human beings have perennial lust to achieve power. Their lust for authority and will to dominate are not comparable to animal. Ted Hughes became familiar with the harsh reality of war at the age of nine, the time of World War II, and through his father’s memories of World War I in which his father had participated. Yet, still critics do not consider him as a war poet like Wilfred Owen or Keith Douglas, since he never experienced the war front. But what he depicts in his war poems are the same cynical, pessimistic feeling of the war which the war poets during war wrote about. In his first collection The Hawk in the Rain (1958), there are some poems on war such as “Bayonet Charge”, “Six Young Men” and “The Casualty”, and in the other collections such as Wodwo (1967) the poem “Out” and from Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow (1970) the poem “Crow Account of the Battle” deal with the themes of death, loss, and war.

In “Bayonet Charge”, the soldier’s will to live and his fear of death are depicted very powerfully.

He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge.
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue crackling air
His terror’s touchy dynamite.  (*Hawk* 51)

When it comes to the matter of life and death, being alive is the only thing man wants. In this poem the soldier drops every thing like “luxuries”, just to get out of “that dazzled with rifle fire”. Hughes brings a powerful image of war, and a soldier who comes face to face with the harsh reality of death as an inevitable fact in war, to show that when it comes to the crux of life, man does not care about “king, honour”, and “human dignity”, “The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye / Sweating like molten iron from the center of his chest”. He just cares about his survival like an animal. Hughes intentionally reduces the status of the soldier to that of an animal. Along with the image of the soldier, there is the image of a hare. The hare is as frightened as the soldier. Hughes makes them equal in front of death, the idea of “king”, “honour” and “dignity” is as meaningful for the hare as for the soldier. It is not a nationalist soldier who fights for his country rather the power of instinct which runs for life.

*Then the shot-slashed furrows*

*Then the shot-slashed furrows*

*Then the shot-slashed furrows*

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.  (*Hawk* 51)

“Six Young Men” deals with the death of six young soldiers in war. The whole poem is illustrated in the frame of a photograph, the photograph of six young men, dressed for a picnic;

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well,
Six young men, familiar to their friends.

Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.
Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride-

Six months after this picture they were all dead. (Hawk 54)

There are two powerful elements of reality that contrast each other in this poem, the power of life, youth and nature against the power of death, horror and nothingness. The detailed explanation of the nature and landscape in the second stanza such as “The leafy valley”, “seven streams fall” are so real and alive that the reader feels he is there. Hughes does not give any explanation about death and the horror of death. He just suddenly demonstrates that the six soldiers are dead, “still that valley has not changed its sound / Though their faces are four decades under the ground”. “Four decades” places emphasis on the death of the soldiers, they are so absent and vanished from the landscape that one feels their absence and lack beside himself. The valley in which the soldiers have taken the photograph, has not changed yet, but “their faces are four decades under the ground”. Nature’s power of will to live is in contrast with the conspicuous absence of six dead soldiers. The powerful description of the reality of life and death in war brings the permanent reality of absence of hope in the scene of life. Life and death through the organic essence of nature and the death of the soldiers in the war continuously change their places, in a way that death dominates the life. The photograph does not illustrate the existence of the soldier rather it is a frame through which their absence is portrayed.
“The Casualty” is an outstanding war-poem from the collection *The Hawk in the Rain*. It depicts the pity casualty of an airman who his airplane has caught fire. It is irony that “farmers” and “housewives”, “wait with interest for the evening news”. The careless reaction of the civilian society is mocked by the poet when he writes;

In the stubble a pheasant

Is craning every way in astonishment.

The hare that hops up, quizzical, hesitant,

Flattens ears and tears madly away and the wren warns.  
*(Hawk 49)*

The animal’s reaction to the crash and burning of the aircraft and the fall of airman is more real compared to the reaction of the humans on the ground. Animals’ will to live in the form of their commotion “craning every way in astonishment”, a hare “flattens ears and tears madly away” and “the wren warns” are in harmony with the struggle of the broken body of the airman. One can observe the last attempt of the airman to save his life in the activity of animals on the ground. There is a strong irony although the airman is dead in the end, but still he is more real than the living people around him: “the burned man / Bulks closer greater flesh and blood than their own”. The other important line of the poem is “Some, who saw fall, smoke beckon. …/ / It was a man fell out of the air alive”, descend of the airman from the air connotes to the fall of man. The fallen airman has “No spine, against heaped sheaves they prop him up / Arrange his limbs in order”. He is completely broken. The broken limbs again connotes to the broken psyche and broken mind of the modern man after the Wars. But it is not the fall into life in the earth rather as the poem “Examination at the Womb-Door” says it is a fall into death. The scandal of wars is another “Fall” which always catches the particular attention of the writers and poets. Man once more lost all his dignity which
through long history built. Now he groans under the unbearable weight of his existence “helpless as ghost”.

“Crow Account of the Battle”, is an apocalyptic violent poem, which comes under the war poems in this study. Crow as the character of the poem represents the voice of mankind. He “suffers violence at the hands of some metaphysical entity, or is the more or less helpless agent of violence, or tells some apocalyptic story” (Gifford and Roberts 112). As all other war poems, this poem too has pathos:

    The cartridges were banging off, as planned,
    The fingers were keeping things going
    According to excitement and orders.
    The unhurt eyes were full of deadliness.
    The bullets pursued their courses
    Through clods of stone, earth and skin,
    Through intestines, pocket-books, brains, hair, teeth
    According to Universal laws.  (*Crow* 21)

The “Universal laws” are the laws of war, the laws of bullets which tear human’s body. The concept of violence in life is dominant in this poem. This part tells us about how man by the help of science and technology designs instruments to kill:

    Reality was giving its lesson,
    Its mishmash of scripture and physics,
    With here, brains in hands, for example,
    And there, legs in a treetop.
    There was no escape except into death. (*Crow* 21-22)

Nothing remains for man, no escape, but to accept the doom of death. This poem like other war poems is “cynical about peace”: 
This had happened too often before
And was going to happen too often in future
And happened too easily
Bones were too like lath and twigs
Blood was too like water
Cries were too like silence (Crow 22)

Hughes believes that war happened before and it is not going to stop now. It will happen in future too. War and violence are intrinsic to man’s life; they are with man for ever. It is the result of war that reduces the bones of dead bodies to lath and twigs and reduces blood to water. It is in the war that nobody can hear the cry of others. War has no consequences for man unless throws him more and more into the realm of absence, the absence of human dignity.

“Out” from the collection of Wodwo (1967) is another outstanding war-poem. Tim Kendall writes that “Hughes wrote to coax himself away from the First World War, resists its author’s palpable designs with a success which accentuates the impossibility of his task” (215). “Out” is an autobiographical poem with “tripartite structure”. It is a memory of Hughes’s childhood. The title of the poem is an attempt to depict the endeavour of the poet to free himself from the nightmarish experience of wars. The first part of the poem has an ironical title “The Dream Time”, whatever Hughes remembers from those days, are like a dream for him. He writes about his father “His memory’s buried, immovable anchor, / Among jawbones and blown-off boots, trees-stumps, shell cases and craters” (Wodwo 155). Hughes wishes to get rid of all these dreams. He writes “I, small and four, / Lay on the carpet as his luckless double”. As a four year old child, Hughes’s mind is possessed by the horror of war and death.
The second part of the poem “the Dead man in his Cave” is a kind of new born or the Christian resurrection. It is a new regeneration of ‘reassembled infantryman to a new death, according to Hughes, men take birth to bear the brunt of death.

... the dead man suddenly

Sits up and sneezes - Atishoo!

Then the nurse wraps him up, smiling,

And, though faintly, the mother is smiling,

And it’s just another baby. (Wodwo 156)

Although this part is a new resurrection it is resurrection to the new dead since Hughes was preoccupied with the idea of death and loss.

The third part the “Remembrance Day” is a new beginning to the memory of the past.

Two words in this part are significant “poppy” and “cenotaph”.

The poppy is a wound, the poppy is the mouth

Of the grave, maybe of the womb searching-

A canvas-beauty puppet on a wire

Today whoring everywhere. It is years since I wore one. (Wodwo 156)

Hughes ends all those memories, “poppy”, “cenotaphs”, and says

So goodbye to that bloody-minded flower.

You dead bury your dead.

Goodbye to the cenotaphs on my mother’s breasts.

Goodbye to all the remaindered charms of my father’s survival

Let England close. Let the green sea- anemone close. (Wodwo 157)
In the collection of poems of 60s onwards this type of renunciation of the war poems is prevalent. Still the abdication from war is not easy and the pessimistic themes such as war, death and violence repeat constantly in his poetry. “In ‘Out’ the horrors of his father’s First World War experiences, which brooded over the poet’s childhood, are called ‘The Dream Time’, an ironic reference to the paradisal early world of the ancestors in Australian mythology” (Gifford and Roberts 49). Hughes in majority of his poems cautions against the savage hidden capability of mankind under the broken civilization.

Absence and the Crises of Identity (Wodwo Poems)

The Collection of Wodwo (1967) is eclectic from different themes such as lack of validity of religious faith and Christianity, lack of identity, and war poems. It also deals with Absentist mythology, nature and animal poems. This book is “a burst of Absentist anguish” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 23). Man is born to die not to live. The ‘instinct’ is the speaker, the character and the main force in the poems. Wodwo represents the rational ego of human beings. It is “a drama of consciousness in which the evolving psyche struggles with the advent of a ‘pure’ subjectivity that conjures ‘Ideas’ along with the unsettling quest for whatness that they involve” (Eddins 9). The violent instincts “deserve better than death” but “death is empty” and “life is death”. The Wodwo poems portray a man “who has dropped or imagined the drop from Christianity” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 23). All of the poems which are in this part in a way or another deal with human beings wanderer in search of lost self. But, what they achieve is more lack and absence. Wodwo is a Middle English Term from the book Gawain and the Green Knight. As Keith Sagar in The Art of Ted Hughes writes that Hughes introduces “Wodwo” as “some sort of Satyr or half-man or half animal, half all
kinds of elemental things, just a little larval being without shape or qualities who suddenly finds himself alive in this world at any time” (Sagar 98).

The poem “Wodwo” with its first line “what am I then?” is the main motive and central idea in all the poems of this collection. Hughes adopts polyphony and different characters including animals and plants, to search for the lost identity. He strives towards an expression of personality. Wodwo is a psychological study of mankind.

> What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over
> Following a faint stain on the air to the river’s edge
> I enter water. What am I to split
> The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed
> Of the river above me upside down very clear

> What am I doing here in mid-air? (Wodwo 183)

In this poem Hughes mocks the “Victorian imperial hubris” (Childs 41). He brings the broken mankind which is not able any more to fulfill the Victorian fantasy about the authority of man over the world and nature. The character of “Wodwo” is a collage, “half-man half-animal, spirit of the forests”, the absent man. He is “an assembly of fragments” (Childs 114). But, the irony here is, the Wodwo-man who wants every thing and wants to be the center of everything not only is not able to achieve them but also he loses his most inner self, his identity. Thus he becomes a rampart, of bewilderment. “Wodwo” is the spirit of the forest and nature. Due to the scientific progress in nature, Wodwo-man expands in all the elements of nature, inside a frog, up and down in the woods, the trees and the roots and everything. He laments his loss of identity painfully. The painful cry of Wodwo for what he had done is in the form of a soliloquy.

The poem “Wodwo” does not have a structure. It is not a united whole but a sum of scattered pieces like the identity of the character Wodwo. “If often prose”, Bedient says
about the style of Hughes’s poem, “they are bursts of prose in the stellar regions of poetry” (Eight 112). The poem is a prose-poem. The innovative style of the poem is in proportion with the anguished consciousness and the themes of the absence of the identity of Wodwo-man. The irregular lines, long sentences without full stop; mixed with phrases, make the reading and comprehension of the poem difficult.

As Gog the narrator of the poem “Gog”, Wodwo feels he is separated from the rest of nature. He does not know who is he? As he says, there is nothing to hold him, he belongs nowhere. To be a rootless being gives Wodwo freedom. “As a ‘half-man’ just emerging from the tyranny of the animal’s pure survival-focus, the wodwo is driven into a peculiarly intellectual ferment by having ‘been given the freedom of this place’” (Eddins 9). He is so free that the entire world including his inner side becomes a prison for him. It is such as the modern man who has freedom but on the contrary has lost all his belongings. “I’ve no threads / fastening me to anything I can go anywhere” (Wodwo 183). He does not have any other aim and wish. He satisfies all his desires and now nothing can give him pleasure. “And picking / bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me / no pleasure and it’s no use”.

…so why do I do it

me and doing that have coincided very queerly

But what shall I be called am I the first

have I an owner what shape am I what

shape am I am I huge if I go

to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees
till I get tired that’s touching one wall of me

for the moment if I sit still how everything

stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre
but there’s all this what is it roots
roots roots roots and here’s the water
again very queer but I’ll go on looking (Wodwo 183)
The lack of identity and not belonging to anywhere are the pains of Wodwo. Like man, Wodwo has both animal appetite and instinct along with a human’s brain and intellect. But, at the same time he is neither an animal to enjoy its instinct like the hawk and jaguar, nor a human to enjoy his talent.

Since the wodwo/poet is "half-animal" and "half-man," he is at once a creature in the grip of blind, will-driven instincts unmitigated by reason and a detached psyche capable of contemplating from the inside the will’s inexorable urgencies. The essential power of Hughes’s poetry derives […] from its struggle to render comprehensible the ineffable immediacies of will from which its images and formulations are - in Schopenhauer's figure - "forcibly" torn. The awe and terror evoked by the Hughesian sublime are produced not so much by the hawk, the jaguar, the predatory landscape on which a particular poem centers, as by the sense of close encounter with the primal energy - rapacious, unstinting, and totally indifferent to human concerns - that fuels existence. (Eddins 10)

Wodwo the bankrupt-man depicts the absence of being, not because of his outer ‘animo anthropo’ appearance but because of the absence of inner self as a magnetic center to hold him. Wodwo asks himself: “What am I?” and “What shall I be called?”, and the poet names him Wodwo, “‘wood-demon, or a humanoid animal or a primitive half-man’” (qtd. in Elkin 17). Wodwo is a being without an identity, and without a proper
shape and figure. He is a bemused being in his bewilderment. Wodwo is an absentist man in search of his self.

The poetry is underpinned by the Christian opposition between the eternal order of being and the temporal chaos of becoming. This antinomy is particularly perceptible in Wodwo, where the universe is presented as an eternal cycle of physical regeneration from which life longs to escape. ... This life is meaningless. Yet, at the same time, the poetic sequence is characterised by a relentless quest for meaning in the form of a lyrical voice that “go [es] on looking”. (Drangsholt 110)

He was supposed to be the center of the universe but now he is not even on the fringes of the universe. He is doomed to nothingness like Gog who absorbs in the darkness and nothingness.

A very important technique which Hughes uses in this poem is the ‘absentist language’ of the poem. The language of the poem does not have a proper structure. It starts with an abrupt beginning, and sentences continue without any punctuation. Hughes bombards the reader with different ideas and questions without letting him to understand the very first one. He drowned the reader in ‘absentist language’, without the use of the word ‘absent’ in the poem. The word I twenty six times has repeated in the poem but the only fact of the poem is the absence of identity behind this hollow I.

In “Gog”, the speaker narrator of this poem, is awakened by the loud voice of God who says “I am Alpha and Omega”, God declares himself as the source of all power, the beginning and the end of everything. From this announcement everybody is scared:

I woke to a shout: ‘I am Alpha and Omega.’

Rocks and a few trees trembled
Deep in their own country.

I ran and an absence bounded beside me. (Wodwo 150)

Gog found himself bound by absence and separated from the world. While other animals like the dog and the mouse are satisfied with whatever they find to eat, Gog even disconnects from his faith which is Messiah.

The dog’s god is a scrap dropped from the table.

The mouse’s saviour is a ripe wheat grain.

Hearing the Messiah cry

My mouth widens in adoration.

How fat are the lichens!

They cushion themselves on the silence.

The air wants for nothing.

The dust, too, is replete. (Wodwo 150)

In the third stanza he observes the nature and his environment and compares himself with them. Everything around him is complete and perfect, except himself. He wonders about what he had done and for what he is being punished. Even his own appearance seems strange to him “My great bones are massed in me”. He tries to be invisible to other creature. He says “I am frightened of what they see”. He has the same feeling about his sound also. He does not like anything about himself, he says: “I am massive on earth. My feetbones beat on the earth / Over the sounds of motherly weeping …” He finds himself formed to “darkness” when he just drinks water from a pool. The narrator of the poem, Gog vanishes into the darkness of the twilight and completely becomes invisible. Gog is a modern human being who represents man’s reaction to the modern changes of the world. Gog feels bewildered after being destroyed and alienated from
his mind. The human aspect of Gog is absent and therefore his devil aspect dominates him. He is that part of human consciousness that has tendency to darkness. Drowning in the darkness he woefully says “what was my error?” Before Gog comes to any conclusion he vanishes in the darkness and absence. Wodwo and Gog as characters resemble Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Like the character of *Metamorphosis*, they also transform to some other creatures, but still Hughes leaves it to the imagination of the reader to create it. However, they suffer from the lack of identity.

“The Thistles” and “Fern” are Hughes’s vegetable poems. In these two poems Hughes attributes human qualities to plants, thus they are linked to human beings. In “The Thistles” he says:

Every one a revengeful burst
Of resurrection, a grasped fistful
Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up (Wodwo 17)

This poem emphasizes the poet’s tendency to describe violence and cruelty in the thistles. They had grown to revenge because they are “From the underground stain of a decayed Viking”. Viking links us to North-warriors of eighth to tenth century; it also links us to the gory history. “A plume of blood” becomes a sign of bravery for the thistles. But, it is the sign of blood thirsty of mankind. “Then they grow grey, like men. / Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear, / Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground” (Wodwo 17).

This part shows how the eagerness of man for power is carried from a generation to a new generation just like epidemic disease. In “the same ground” people come, struggle and die and “their sons appear” and come and undergo the same struggles, although sometimes it is meaningless and ridiculous. The human life in the poetry of Hughes is completely absent. Animals and plants actually represent human beings. “The Thistle”
is a bitter humour of human life. Even when Hughes gives an animal or a plant life as a symbol for human beings, he can not hide the violence. In this poem he emphasizes the violent power of “instinct”, which is the only real force remaining in humans. This instinct depicts, will to life. The non-human part of our being is present but our human conscious is absent. In “Fern”, the human being is absent while the fern is attributed to him.

Here is the fern’s frond, unfurling a gesture,
Like a conductor whose music will now be pause
And the one note of silence
To which the whole earth dances gravely. (Wodwo 28)

The movement of the fern compares to a music conductor, when he indicates a pause. Even the mouse and the spider come to know about the solemn movements of the fern. The last three lines bring up the main issue. And, among them, the fern: “Dances gravely, like the plume / Of a warrior returning, under the low hills, / Into his own kingdom” (Wodwo 28).

In these lines the movement of the fern compares to the feather on the helmet of a warrior, when he returns from war. Wearing a feather was the sign of victory in war. As in “the Thistles” mentioned, the vegetation represent human beings in the absence of consciences and the presence of instinct. The highest honour for the movement of a fern is to move like an ornament feather of a warrior. The fern is not compared to the warrior like in “The Thistle”, rather to the feather of the warrior. There is irony; a warrior wears the ornament feather as a sign of victory. The victory in war where people just kill each other, war is the pure violence. The irony is that a pure element of nature such as the movement of a fern is compared to an element of violence in human beings. The killers of the war wear feathers to show that they have butchered many that
is why they are here now. So the fern and man are combined together, while the human being is absent in the poem, but his sign of cruelty and violence is present.

“Root, Stem, Leaf”, is an Existentialist poem, which deals with meaninglessness and absurdity of life. The title of the poem itself conveys this idea. The life of a tree starts in the roots, then they get stems and the stems get leaves. Finally the leaves wither and the whole plant dies. The first part of the poem deals with different elements of life in the moors. The spluttering of the insects and grass before the light of sun touches them. The life in the moor is compared to “the dimension of woman”. The moor and the woman both have the power of fertility “As water does those of water”.

But the river

Is a prayer to its own waters

Where the circulation of our world is pouring

In stillness

Everyone’s peace, no less your own peace.  

The streams in the moor make a sound while crossing the region and it seems to be offering a prayer to its own water. But, still in this activity of life, there is a meaninglessness of the cycle of life. The “stillness” of the moor drowns the poem in the silence of the death rather than to the peace of life. The last stanza brings out the harsh reality of the peace of the moor:

Out of bedrock your blood’s operation

Carves your eyes clear not so quickly

As your mouth dips deeper

Into the massed darkness.  

(SP 76)

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Like the streams in the moor the embryo emerges from the blood and a human being is formed. In the process of life and death, a life forms, continues and finally the being descents into the darkness and death, and this cycle continues.

The second part of the poem deals with a human being, an eighty years old woman. She looks at nature and says; “Nothing added, nothing taken away. / Year after year the trout in the pools / Grow heavy and vanish, without ever emerging” (SP 77).

For her nothing changes in nature except herself. The fish in the pools have been growing, breeding and dying during the years. Plants like “Foxglove” and “harebell” growing “on the steep slope”; the lives of the fish in the ponds and the plants in the mountain have a simple cycle and at the same time they show “the horror of the incarnate world” (qtd. in Elkin 25). It is a matter of the routine and the regeneration force of nature. In spring they grow and in winter they die. But, the old woman will die without coming back to this world, before dying she has her own worldly ambition. The old woman has been stricken by arthritis in her joints and also her vision has deteriorated in the course of years. Death lives in her and shows its scary face to her in the form of diseases. She is going to die and join the realm of nothingness, because her life is transient in contrast with the permanency of nature.

The third part of the poem is related to a human’s life object, it’s about a girl’s old diary. A very old diary with its crumbling pages is kept in a sales room in a museum. But nobody is interested in it.

    Crumbling, glanced into
    By strange smiles, in a saleroom,
    Where the dust is of eyes and hearts, in proportion,
    As well as old shoes, meteors, and dung… (SP 77)
The other object on sale in the museum is a spoon which once was valuable however, in this museum only spiders crawl over it. The diary and the spoon like other objects in the museum have miserable facts behind them. Although, people every day visit the museum and look at them “by strange smiles”, they don’t inherit them. The last line “everything is inheriting everything” is a bitter fact about descending of human beings to the objects, and instead objects come to the level of “inheriting” human beings. Like the old diary and the old spoon the other objects in the museum once belonged to somebody, but now those people though dead these items are in the museum. Generation after generations view the objects of the museum everyday. People die, but the objects will be there, thus, the last line “everything is inheriting everything” shows that men belongs to objects. We human beings belong to the objects of our house, they inherit us.

Material possession defines our status in the society. Man is identified and respected for not what he is, but for what he possesses in terms of wealth and materials. The whole poem is based on Existentialist philosophy. Three different parts of the poem in three different ways bring the reader to the same conclusion, the meaninglessness and absurdity of human’s life.

“The Bear”, is a poem about the old self and the new self. In an Eskimo’s life, a dream of a bear helps them to become wiser and it is a sign of attaining knowledge and wisdom. In this poem the bear does not belong to the Eskimo’s time, but belongs to our modern days. In this Absentist era of true self, the dream of the bear is not anymore symbol of knowledge, but a sign of lifelessness and nothingness. The first stanza depicts a great bear in deep hibernation in a cave, like a dark eye in the side of a mountain

In the huge, wide-open, sleeping eye of the mountain
The bear is the gleam in the pupil

Ready to awake

And instantly focus.  (Wodwo 41)

The flashing fur of the bear looks like the pupil of an eye in the bulk image of the mountain. The bear’s eye is “ready to awake”, but the tiny eye of the bear is lost in its thick black fur. The bear has a thick coat of layers of fat, which has been built up from the flesh and bones of animals which it has eaten. So through the death of other animals, the bear is able to survive the winter and lives up to the next spring.

The bear is glueing

Beginning to end

With glue from people’s bones

In his sleep.

The bear is digging

In his sleep

Through the wall of the Universe

With a man’s femur.  (Wodwo 41)

The bear outlasts by killing other animals, his life continues in the deaths of those he has eaten. The dead animals live in him, so he is a kind of new being; “The bear sleeps / In a kingdom of walls / In a web of rivers”. This is only the surface meaning of the poem. As Hughes says about the bear; “He is the ferryman / To dead land.” The bear rides and guides people to the “dead land”. The bear is “glue from people’s bones”; its survival depends on the bones of man not animals. Moreover, he is “digging / In his sleep // With a man’s femur”. He is a river “Where people bending to drink / See their dead selves.” Who is this bear? Whether it is a normal bear that lives in the wild or
something related to human life? As long as this poem is in the *Crow* collection and it relates to the theme of *Crow*, it responds to death and absurdity. The bear like the black crow is a symbol of death. Like *Crow* in “Examination at the Womb-door” who “evidently” is stronger than death, death in this poem in the form of a bear deserves everything as the last line says; “His price is everything.” “The Bear” is connected to the next collection *Crow*.

Crow as a Mytho-Absentist Poem

The Collection of *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) is an ultimate piece of Absentist poetry. *Crow* is one of the modern umbrage pain poems about the extinction of human beings which ever have been written. *Crow* is the story of the vexation of man who is void of all beliefs and faith. The colourful collection of *Crow* starts with blasphemy and execrations about Christian myths. Hughes creates his own myth. It is a masterpiece of ‘Mytho-absentism’. This collection of 60 poems in 80 pages, spans the whole world, the creation, God, Heaven and Hell, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and what is on the earth; from Trickster to Greek mythology, to modern time and World Wars and so on. Hughes writes with fury that comes from his angst and anxiety. Anguish and savage energy create a symbolic character for modern man.

In *Crow* Hughes employs the structure of mythology, where there is always a hero, such as here, a crow; a journey or a quest, like “flying from sun to sun” (*Crow* 14); there are some problems, suffering and hardship on the way, a kind of riddle, such as “Examination at the Womb-door”, that the hero has to solve and when he solves the riddle, he becomes a wise man, “Grown so wise grown so terrible” (*Crow* 80). *Crow* has two types of mythology- one, the myth that descends from Greek mythology the other is the myth that deals with Christian mythology and “pseudo-biblical themes” such as the story of Creation, Fall of man, the Crucifixion of Christ, the story of Adam, Eve and the
Serpent. “These themes contain inversions, parodies and semi-burlesque accounts of the Biblical Creations and other Christian concepts. In this poem sequence Hughes revalues the Christian myth, particularly in the Genesis story” (Madhukumar 3).

The following poems will be discussed in this chapter; “Two Legend”, “Lineage”, “Examination at the Womb-door”, “A Kill”, “Crow and Mama”, “The Door”, “A Childish Prank”, “Crow’s First Lesson” and “Crow Alights” with a view to examining Absentism. There are other poems such as “Apple Tragedy” and “Snake Hymn” which give more clarification to the idea of mytho-absentism. But Hughes does not want to repeat the old mythology; he brings completely innovative themes and styles in the context of religious, spiritual and mythical past. “Myth is, in fact, non-mimetic” as Drangsholt says the goal of literature is

To produce something entirely new… literature [is] regarded as a new genre- ‘the genericity, so to speak, and the generativity of literature, grasping and producing themselves in an entirely new, infinitely new Work’. …literature is regarded as an isolated entity in perfect closure upon itself. … a reading of literature as a self-constituting mode of production, or ritual, has interest in relation to metaphor and myth, … Myth is a tautegorical entity that says nothings other than itself. …myth transcends the binary oppositions that govern our understanding of world …. (116)

It is for gaining this aim that Hughes brings the absence of faith and the scattered identity of modern man to project the dark and pessimistic mood of the poems. The Absentist myth of ‘Crow’ is an indiscriminate quest, not the exact quest which the heroes of Greek mythology did, but a kind of wanderer, homelessness. The wanderer crow starts his journey from nothingness and ends in nothingness; - he is “flying from
sun to sun”. He begins with “bent[s] in emptiness / over emptiness” (Crow 9). He spreads this emptiness to everything: Christian faith, Greek myths, rational thought, history, an animal’s will to live and human voracity. Crow is a perfect piece of Absentist perversity. The Christian God is replaced by the Crow; the anguish, fragmented, and ‘a childish prank’ of the anti-hero of Hughes’s Mytho-absentist. This replacement is derived from the post-religious world of Absentism. The myth of Crow is the projection of modern man in the Absentist world. He is a collective of the ego of mankind in contemporary Absentist life. Gifford and Roberts in their book Ted Hughes: A Critical Study, quote from Paul Radin’s The Trickster, that the crow is a trickster too;

The symbol which Trickster embodies is not a static one. It contains within itself the promise of differentiation, the promise of god and man. For this reason every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew. No generation understands him fully, but no generation can do without him. Each had to include him in all its theologies, in all its cosmogonies, despite the fact that it realized that he did not fit properly into any of them, for he represents not only the undifferentiated and distant past, but likewise the undifferentiated present within every individual. This constitutes his universal and persistent attraction. And so he became and remained everything to every man-god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and creator. If we laugh at him, he grins at us. What happens to him happens to us. (120-121)

The collection of Crow demonstrates Absentist mythology. The crow is at the same time hero and anti-hero, the creator and destroyer, the protagonist and antagonist. The
idea of heroism itself is shattered down in modern poetry, especially in the Absentist poems. Hence, Crow, the hero of Absentist poetry is made of negative elements such as nothingness, emptiness and darkness. In the first poem of this collection “Two Legends”, the word black appears eleven times and it is the dominant word and is in contrast with, sun and light. ‘Black’ introduces as the essence of Crow the character. It clarifies that Crow is nothing but a legend. A legend which consists of black colour, negative thought and empty soul. The first part of the poem is “literally a legend of the creation of Crow. Crow is a flying negative, a bubble of anti-matter, a hole in the universe” (Hirschberg 70). The legend is the pre-existence of crow, the inner world of the blackness of ‘the heart’, ‘the liver’ and ‘the lungs’, the world ‘without eye’.

Black was the without eye
Black the within tongue
Black was the heart
Black the liver, black the lungs
Unable to suck in light (Crow 9)

Crow-man is made up of the negative elements which the rest of existence is made up of. These negative essentials come from the heart of life and existence. “Hughes had not merely created a character, but an environment, a realm of emptiness whose symbol is ‘a crow, a black rainbow / Bent in emptiness / over emptiness’” (Hirschberg 71). While the first part of the poem shows how all the fundamentals and the essence of crow was ‘Black’, the second part of the poem shows how by birth of the crow, blackness comes to our universe.

Black is the earth-globe, one inch under,
An egg of blackness
Where sun and moon alternate their wealthers
To hatch a crow (Crow 9)

Crow the black bird, by birth from “Black the blood in its loud tunnel”, brings the blackness to the universe and colours the world for ever. The egg of the crow is the egg of emptiness; he brings emptiness along with darkness. The crow is the bird of absence and absurdity, a bird of nothingness, because he hatches from emptiness and separates absence everywhere. Disconnected from the past his life becomes “a vacuity experienced through sensations”. Like the crow, man has forgotten his origin. So in his mytho-absentist poetry Hughes reveals the fear of the dethroned man. Man feels the horror not only in ‘the heart of darkness’ of life, but also “he shivered with the horror of creation” itself. Hughes at the same time questions the inability of modern life to heal the wounds of man; he questions the creation and shows “creation had failed again”.

In this Absentist myth, Hughes deconstructs the Biblical tales and rewrites them in a new vein in Crow. Thus, God is no more the hero and creator of the world, rather a simple, black, cartoonish bird, a clown, a little man of absurdity. The second poem in the collection “Lineage” is about creation, “In the beginning was Scream”. Creation here is not according to the Bible. “Lineage” challenges the authenticity of the Bible. In the Bible we read: “In the beginning there was word”, but “Lineage” says, in the beginning there was no word, there was no God, but only “Scream”. According to this poem the genealogy and root of everything including God, man and crow return to scream in the fear of nothingness and emptiness. The bases of life are on fear and tension of living in the actual world. The blood got born out of scream.

In the beginning was Scream

Who begot Blood
Who begat Eye
Who begat Fear
Who begat Wing
Who begat Bone
Who begat Granite
Who begat violet
Who begat Guitar
Who begat Sweat (Crow 10)

In this poem, creation, starts with fear and scream and reaches nothingness. The poem says that Adam comes from the blood which finally produces nothingness, and Adam antedates God. This is against the tradition of the Bible that God creates Adam. Here in “Lineage” Adam is created first and then Mary begets God.

Who begat Adam
Who begat Mary
Who begat God
Who begat Nothing
Who begat Never
Never Never Never

Who begat Crow. (Crow 10)

It seems in this poem Hughes is influenced by Darwin’s theory of the “Origin of Species”. Hughes introduces the crow as a developed form of man. The crow is on the highest level of creation. As mentioned in the Introduction, there is no unity in Absentist philosophy. There is no pure whole phenomenon. The idea of God is scattered, man is scattered. J.S. Drangsholt writes “Hughes identifies the fall of man from unity into division and death, so that redemption will be the reversal of this process through a ‘Resurrection to Unity’” (111) man is separated from his Unity with
God and eternity to mortal life and death. In this poem man is an amalgamation of different meanings and ideas.

Gifford and Robert write that “the begetting of God by Mary is another version of Eve’s fall. Since God is man-made, or rather woman-made in this poem, he can of course produce nothing except the idea of nothingness, the mystical eternity of ‘Never / Never Never Never’ out of which any mystical creature might be invented to satisfy a psychic need” (129). After the concept of God, nothingness and emptiness got born, the crow the hero of universe and absentist myth comes out of Never, nothingness and absence. The poem relates the progenitors of crow to “Scream”, to “fear”, to “Nothing” and to “Never”. In this cyclical movement of creation of crow not only man, but God also does not possess any sacred place. ‘God’, ‘Adam’, ‘Mary’, and ‘Crow’ all are in same position, they are all equal. The poem ends with the creation of the crow which again is connected to the beginning of the poem which is the “Scream” of the crow. This poem is near to the perfect shape of a poem, as Coleridge believes, it is “a snake with its Tail in its Mouth'” (qtd. in Drangsholt 117).

In “Theology”, Hughes brings another version of the story of creation. Hughes in this blasphemous poem appears as a disbeliever in the Bible’s account of creation. According to the Bible God created Adam and Eve and let them to live happily in the Garden of Eden, had they not eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree. Serpent the enemy of Adam and Eve tempted them to eat the forbidden fruit. After this disobedience of God, they became aware of their sexual desires. Thus, God sends them all to the earth. Hughes in his “theology” has another story:

No, the serpent did not
Seduce Eve to the apple.
All that’s simply
Corruption of the facts.

Adam ate the apple
Eve ate Adam.
The serpent ate Eve.
This is the dark intestine. (Wodwo 149)

Hughes brings this point to our attention that without the temptation of Serpent, Adam ate the apple. In the Absentist theology of Hughes, Adam from the beginning lacks faith in God, so, he does not need the temptation of Serpent to disobey God. Hughes replaces Adam by the Serpent. He shows that the absence of faith in Adam and Eve was the reason for their fall not the temptation of Serpent. Adam had committed the original sin without the impulse of Eve. In this poem like the poem “Lineage”, again Hughes gives the same position to Adam, Eve and Serpent, all of them are equal. What is behind all these stories are “the dark intestine”, that controls human beings. Man had been engulfed in his eagerness and voracity since the time of his creation.

The serpent, meanwhile,
Sleeps his meal off in Paradise-
Smiling to hear
God’s querulous calling. (Wodwo 149)

The last stanza shows the triumph of Serpent over God. This poem thematically is similar to the poem of crow, because like those poems it depicts the absence of faith in God and in Christianity.

From the creation of the whole universe and crow, Hughes shifts to the creation of man in the “Examination at the Womb-Door”,

Who owns these scrawny little feet? Death.
Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face? Death.

Who owns these still-working lungs? Death.

Who owns this utility coat of muscles? Death.

Who owns these unspeakable guts? Death.

Who owns these questionable brains? Death. (Crow 11)

The poem introduces ‘death’ immediately after the creation. In these two poems Hughes contrasts life and death. The connection between life and death is complicated, while the presence of one is in the absence of the other, yet they are part of each other, and their existence depends on each other.

Death like an examiner in the womb-door, asks many questions of the unborn foetus. These questions resemble the leading questions used in baptism in Christianity. But, there is an irony here, according to Christianity, there is hope of salvation and eternal life, and man gets born to life, but in “Examination at the womb-Door” death shows its power over man, as the last destiny of human beings, where there is no hope and Saviour. Man gets born into death and death becomes the last stop of the universe. Death is stronger than ‘hope’, ‘will’, ‘love’, and ‘life’. “But who is stranger than death?” the crow passes and says “me evidently”. Though, ‘death’ is the superior power in the universe yet the crow the symbol of absurdity, is more powerful than death. By taking advantage over death, the crow achieves the qualities of death. “Examination” is a post-religious poem; it denies the power of God and gives the superiority not even to death, but to the crow. The crow like death is not able to transfer man from this world to the world of judgment, because basically in the crow’s ideology the judgment day is absent where there is only void and emptiness.

Crow achieves the ability of God in “A Childish Prank”. In this poem the crow identifies himself with God, because like God he creates impulses and desires in
mankind. The crow is a negative creator and instead of the soul he infuses man with sexuality and animal lust.

Crow laughed.

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 (Crow 15)

Crow also identifies himself with Satan. The crow tries to help Adam and Eve because they are without souls. Their life without soul is dull and boring. God is incapable of solving their problem “the problem was so great, it dragged him asleep”. The crow’s solution is to bring a worm in two halves and stuff each in them. When the severed parts of the worm want to get back together, Adam and Eve come to know about a strange feeling “Neither knew what had happened”. Ignorant about what happened is the problem of man. The crow “went on laughing”, and his laughter is bitter, harsh, painful and farcical. In this poem the crow is beyond the human’s need and he mocks human perplexity. “A Childish Prank” is a ridicule of God by the crow. Crow is responsible for all the sufferings he has caused.

In “The Door”, Crow personifies himself with Adam after his fall and alights on the earth. In many poems crow and man become one character ‘crow-man’.
Out under the sun stands a body.

It is growth of the solid world.

It is part of the world’s earthen wall.

The earth’s plants—such as the genitals
And the flowerless navel
Live in its crevices.

Also, some of earth’s creatures—such as the mouth.

All are rooted in earth, or eat earth, earthy,

Thickening the wall.  (Crow 14)

“The Door” continues the previous poem “A Childish Prank”, Adam having committed mortal sin becomes aware of his sexual desires. When the crow-man had thrown into earth, he becomes part of “the solid world”. He is “part of the world’s earthen wall”.

But, he is not alone, Satan is with him. In his mortal sin Satan motivates him; therefore God sends Satan to earth. “Crow basically has two characters—crow himself and God. Crow is resilient, resourceful, evasive, built to survive every kind of disaster: he is a protean figure, but these are his irreducible characteristics. God is sometimes his partner, sometimes his adversary or rival, often a passive presence” (Thwaite 58). But this study shows how three different characters God, Adam, Satan infuse in a new character in the form of the crow. Crow represents these three identities at different occasions. Crow after sharing in the act of creation with God in heaven, shares the evil act with Satan before and after the fall. Therefore, Crow is the hero and simultaneously anti-hero, a creator and a destroyer, a soul and a body, black and white, a crow and a man, a crow and Satan, a crow and God.

Only there is a doorway in the wall-
A black doorway:
The eye’s pupil.

Through that doorway came Crow.

Flying from sun to sun, he found this home.  (Crow 14)

But, whom does the crow represent? Crow comes from the black doorway of man’s pupil. “The eye’s pupil” of man is the only way for the crow to come to its existence. As in “Lineage”, mentioned crow comes from “Never” means nothingness, absurdity and absence. These poems portray that these elements are in the black doorway of man’s mind, all come from the dark whole of human unconscious.

“A Kill” is the first reaction of man after being sent to the earth, it is the pain of knowing and awakening. The structure of the poem is scattered and fragmented just like the human’s mind. There is no period, no comma, no exclamation point and no question mark. “A Kill” like its structure, has vagueness and ambiguity in its motive. “A Kill” is not killing a person exactly but torturing the anonymous character from the previous poem “The Door”:

Flogged lame with legs
Shot through the head with balled brains
Shot blind with eyes
Nailed down by his own ribs
Strangled just short of his last gasp
By his own windpipe
Clubbed unconscious by his own heart

Seeing his life stab through him, a dream flash
As he drowned in his own blood

Dragged under by the weight of his guts

Uttering a bowel-emptying cry which was his roots tearing out

Of the bedrock atom

Gaping his mouth and letting the cry rip through him as at a distance

And smashed into the rubbish of the ground

He managed to hear, faint and far-'It’s a boy!'

Then everything went black (Crow 12)

This poem is the pain of being; being a human, existing in the world. He has been “Nailed down by his own ribs” and “he drowned in his own blood”. This world is the realm of absence, absence of happiness and hope, absence of faith to save man. Man is shackled by lusts and even desires “Dragged under by the weight of his guts”. The title of the poem “A Kill” connotes the existence of man, which is a kill, as Rosenthal and Gall about the “Criminal Ballad” say “in this universe existence itself is a crime” (463). Thus, man’s fall is equal to death, and life here on “the solid world” is equal to death. The poem is a new situation of man-crow. Actually the unrecognized pronoun of ‘he’, ‘his’ and ‘him’ could relate to crow as well as man because in this poem crow identifies himself with man. Like ancient mythology the hero transmutes to a man without making any trouble to the plot of the poem. The sentence “it’s a boy!” connects this
poem to the next poem “Crow’s First Lesson”. In this poem God attempts to teach the
crow the abilities of human beings to speak and to love. The crow-man character lacks
these elements. “‘Love’, said God. ‘Say Love.’” But crow is an irresponsive creature
and can not learn something which is against his will. Thus crow “gaped, and the white
shark crashed into the sea / And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth.”
The crow creates horror and scares away other creatures “the white shark”, “blue fly”,
“tsetse” and “mosquito” when he wants to express the word love. Crow-man is unable
to learn any positive lesson it is against his negative and absurd nature. Instead he is the
origin of all evil and guilt.

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-

Crow flew guiltily off. (Crow 16)

“Crow’s First Lesson” finishes with the prank of the crow without learning to love.

The idea of the lack of faith in Christianity and in the other religions is the theme
of modern poetry and a basic subject of the Absentist poetry. In this mytho-poetic work,
Hughes, very successfully portrays an invisible creature like the crow as a hero of
creation. As quoted by Usha V.T., Hughes believes that:

Religious negotiations had formerly embraced and humanized the
archaic energies of instinct and feeling. They had conversed in simple
but profound terms with the forces struggling inside peoples and had
civilized them, or attempted to. Without religion those powers have
become dehumanized. The whole inner world has become elemental,
chaotic, continually more primitive and beyond our control. It has become a place of demons. But of course, insofar as we are disconnected anyway from that world, and lack the equipment to pick up its signals, we are not aware of it. All we register is the vast absence, the emptiness, the sterility, the meaninglessness, the loneliness. (9)

Emanated by the Existentialist philosophy of Heidegger, Hughes figures out creatures of nothingness, of Absentist beings thrown into existence, the existence which is nothingness. In the Absentist myth of Hughes, the human beings are absent while the animal rules man. Being occupied with the idea of animal, shows Hughes’ lost faith in the notion of man as the superior creature on the earth. Hence, human beings do not have prime position in most of his poems.

Among other Absentist poets such as Kinsella, Hill, and Graham, Ted Hughes is the only Absentist poet who uses Absentist myth. Although the other poets use mythology, their myth does not have the attributes of Absentism. In his Absentist myth, Hughes turns back to the source of creation, to the origin of being. Since the present modern life is of boredom and of nothingness, the Absentist poet suffers this absurdity more and more. Therefore the poet equips himself with the weapon of myth that “directs the course of his poetry through the sterility of modern urban society and the faded columns of organized religion in search of an elemental core of vitality and a pre-Christian faith.” (Usha 8)
Works Cited


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