

THE MANIFESTATION OF METAPHYSICAL FEATURES IN TED HUGHES' POETRY

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Abstract

This study explores the metaphysical elements in Ted Hughes' poetry, highlighting how his works reflect deep existential themes. Hughes, known for his powerful imagery and nature-centric poetry, frequently bridges the physical and spiritual worlds. His poems, such as *The Thought-Fox*, *Thrushes*, and *Pike*, incorporate themes of inspiration, survival, violence, and death, resonating with the traditions of metaphysical poetry. While Hughes is not classified as a metaphysical poet in the traditional sense, his works exhibit intellectual depth, symbolic richness, and philosophical exploration, aligning him with the metaphysical tradition.

Keywords: Metaphysical poetry, existential themes, inspiration, survival, violence, death, symbols, nature, philosophical exploration, imagery power.

Introduction

Ted Hughes is one of the most prominent authors who left a significant mark in 20th-century British poetry with his immortal works. His full name is Edward James Hughes, and he was born on August 17, 1930, in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire. He was the third and youngest child of Edith Farrar Hughes and William Henry Hughes. When Hughes turned seven, his family moved to a mining town in South Yorkshire.

After moving to Mexborough, Hughes began writing poetry. His first literary influence was Rudyard Kipling, and initially, he enjoyed writing adventure stories. As his reading expanded, he discovered the poetry of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. His teachers and his sister Olwyn encouraged his poetic aspirations, and during his student years, Hughes achieved considerable success.

While studying at Pembroke College, Cambridge, Hughes initially developed a keen interest in archaeology and anthropology, which he pursued for a time. Naturally, this interest in myths, legends, and folklore contributed to the uniqueness of his poetry. The influences of Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Sylvia Plath further enhanced the appeal of his work.

Hughes' poetry is characterized by a broad vocabulary, skillful use of phrases and idioms, and a deliberate selection of words. He does not use any word arbitrarily; readers must delve deeply into his conceptual world and understand his psychological approach to grasp the meaning of

his poetry. However, this does not mean that Hughes could not use simple language—on the contrary, some of his poems feature accessible vocabulary.

Hughes is well known for his poems about animals, such as *The Thought-Fox*, *Thrushes*, *Hawk in the Rain*, *The Horses*, and many others. His ability to express ideas symbolically through animals is a distinctive feature of his poetry.

Over different periods, Hughes' work has been received with varying evaluations—some have praised it, while others have criticized it. Critics like Thomas Nye have sought to understand why Hughes often focused on the animal world and have provided explanations. However, it would be wrong to claim that Hughes wrote only about animals; his poetry also explores themes of nature, family relationships, love, death, and separation. These themes are recurrent throughout many of his works.

As a modernist poet, Hughes addressed complex themes. His poetry often alludes to nature, with animals frequently serving as protagonists. Literary works, especially poetry, are inherently complex and rich in genres, and poets use them to enhance readers' critical thinking and appreciation of language. Hughes' poetry is particularly engaging for readers because it deals with themes such as inspiration, loneliness, survival, and authoritarianism, which immediately capture attention. Through the analysis of Hughes' poetry, readers can enhance their critical thinking and apply these reflections to their daily lives.

With his powerful and often relatable poetry, Hughes became a significant figure in 20th-century British literature. His deep connection with nature and his poetic exploration of the natural world have made his works a subject of numerous studies on metaphysical poetry.

Metaphysical poetry, a style established by Samuel Johnson, became popular in the 17th century and is associated with poets such as John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and George Herbert. This poetry is characterized by intellectual reflections, extended metaphors, the exploration of complex ideas, and the connection between the physical and spiritual realms.

Elements of metaphysical themes can be found in Hughes' poetry. His work often examines profound questions about existence, human experience, and the interconnectedness of all things. Like metaphysical poets, Hughes employs vivid imagery and symbolism to explore deep truths and emotions.

One of the key aspects of metaphysical poetry is its ability to bridge the physical and spiritual domains through unconventional metaphors and unexpected associations. This synthesis frequently appears in Hughes' poetry, as he often uses nature as a means to explore human experiences and emotions.

Although Hughes may not entirely fit into the traditional category of a metaphysical poet, his work shares many similarities with the metaphysical tradition. The depth, complexity, and universal themes in his poetry align with the spirit of metaphysical poetry, even as he maintains a unique voice and style.

Hughes is not typically classified as a metaphysical poet in the traditional sense, yet some of his poems contain elements that resonate with metaphysical themes. For example, *Thrushes* compares thrushes to humans, suggesting that these birds surpass humans in certain ways. Written in three stanzas, each consisting of eight lines, the poem is free verse without rhyme,



yet its high literary quality makes it compelling. Each stanza builds upon the ideas expressed in the previous one.

Thrushes is a meditative poem about the beauty and cruelty of nature. Hughes admires the beauty of nature but does not ignore its darker aspects. He portrays how something as beautiful as a bird can also be a harbinger of death, illustrating the dichotomous nature of the natural world.

In *The Thought-Fox*, Hughes explores the act of poetic creation and the mysterious process of inspiration. The fox in the poem can be interpreted as a metaphor for creative inspiration, a symbol of the subconscious mind, or even a representation of the poet's own psyche. The poem delves into how art emerges from the depths of the unconscious, shaping reality through language.

In *Pike*, Hughes uses the image of a predatory fish to explore power, violence, and primal instincts within human nature. The poem reflects on the dark aspects of existence, the forces driving both the natural world and human behavior, and the interconnectedness of life and death.

In *Crow's Account of the Battle* (from *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*), Hughes' character of the Crow serves as a symbol of human nature and the darker aspects of the world. The poem narrates a cosmic battle that can be interpreted as a metaphor for human struggles and conflicts. It explores existential themes, life and death, and the eternal questions of existence.

Although these poems do not strictly follow the traditional framework of 17th-century metaphysical poetry, they contain elements that resonate with metaphysical inquiry, complexity, and depth. Hughes' poetry frequently blurs the boundaries between the physical and spiritual realms, encouraging readers to contemplate the deeper mysteries of existence and the interconnectedness of all things.

The metaphysical aspect of Hughes' poetry is particularly evident in his constant engagement with the themes of existence and non-existence. Life and the desire to live are not separate from death in his work; rather, he portrays them as two opposing forces in the same struggle, two sides of the same metaphysical phenomenon. A fundamental question in his poetry is the nature of the relationship between life and death.

The sources of Hughes' reflections on death can be found in his biography. One of his earliest encounters with death came from the stories his father told him about his experiences in World War I. Hughes revisits this in his poem *Out*, which not only references his father's experiences but also explores the relationship between father and son.

Hughes' early interest in farming and his time spent working as a farmer brought him closer to nature. Consequently, he came to see birth and death as natural processes. The 1960s were marked by two tragic events: the suicide of his wife Sylvia Plath in 1963 and the loss of his partner Assia Gutmann in a car accident in 1969. These events influenced Hughes to explore themes of death and rebirth, aligning with Eastern European poetry and ancient mythological beliefs.

In 1983, Hughes published *River*, a poetry collection rich in symbolism that aligns with Romantic ideas. The rivers depicted in these poems serve as metaphors for life and the passage



between death and existence. This recalls the themes present in 19th-century poetry and painting, emphasizing the tradition of self-discovery.

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