
Ted Hughes's Romantic Revisionism in *Crow*: A Reading with Harold Bloom

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Abstract

Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow (1970) represents a radical shift from Ted Hughes's earlier poetry. It offers a mythopoetic vision of a bleak modern world. This study proposes a new reading of the *Crow* sequence based on the poetic myth Hughes generates. The literary methodology is based on a Bloomian premise. By employing Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence", this study focuses on Hughes's engagement with his Romantic predecessors, particularly Percy Bysshe Shelley. In this connection, by applying Bloom's concept of "clinamen", the essay explores how Hughes both inherits and subverts Romantic mythmaking to create a distinctive modern myth of his own. It argues that *Crow* emerges from an agonistic struggle with Romantic conventions and ideals, functioning simultaneously as an act of paying homage and rebellion against them. This study aims to reveal how Hughes reshapes the Romantic legacy within a modern poetic framework by juxtaposing his *Crow* sequence with Shelley's "Alastor" and the metaphor of the poet as a solitary nightingale. In doing so, we focus on the narrative quality and internalized quest romance both Hughes and Shelley have developed in their words. In the end, this juxtaposition is extended to explain how *Crow* (the character) as the poetic persona of Hughes resembles the Shelleyan singing nightingale, and how such a shift from a nightingale to a black crow reinforces Bloom's idea that the whole history of poetry writing consists of strong action and inevitable reaction; a competition between the latecomer poets and their precursors.

Keywords: The Crow, Harold Bloom, Poetic Revisionism, Romanticism, Ted Hughes

Introduction

Of Ted Hughes's oeuvre, his *Crow* poems – also known as *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) – stand out for their innovative narrative with an animal hero. Animals have always had a ubiquitous presence in Hughes's poetry. Among the variety of animals in his menagerie, it seems that Hughes has been obsessed with this oft-negatively represented fowl for a period of time. Although considerable inspiration for his writings was derived from Leonard Baskin's sketches of the bird, Hughes's obsession with capturing the true essence (or "crowiness") of the animal was initially triggered as he was looking at an airplane: "an aircraft was crossing in one direction, a crow in the other" (Bate 285). The uncanny scene was enough inspiration for a lover (and once a hunter) of animals to bring into his literary imagination a biblical bird – an ominous bird who now appears to contradict the path of human development, i.e., the airplane.

Since its first publication (1970), the narrative style of the *Crow* sequence has drawn scholarly attention. The book tells a non-linear, sometimes incoherent, story of the birth and growth of its main character, namely the eponymous crow. In some poems, as in "Revenge Fable", the Crow is totally absent, while in others he has different roles. He observes and records a wasteland of human culture in "Crow Alights" while in "Crow Blacker than Ever" he yearns to be

a mediator between the divine realm and the human realm. Such a stylistic feature somehow places *Crow* in the tradition of modernist works like Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). If Hughes delivers an incoherent narrative, it is to extend the modernist vision of cultural and spiritual collapse – shown by Eliot in a post-Great-War period. Eliot's multiple voices in the five sections of *The Waste Land* are replaced by Crow's actions and visions. In other words, if Eliot tries to display a culturally devastated society of a time after the First World War, Hughes takes courage to reflect social predicaments after the Second World War. The decades after the 1940s designate a period when British poetry prioritized imagination over reality and showed "greater linguistic daring" (Stigen 108). In line with this, the *Crow* collection uses a more straightforward language, with a "super-simple and super-ugly" diction (Brown 76).

Crow has been widely discussed through diverse lenses so far. Neil Roberts divides the volume into a number of sections based on its fragmented narrative. Accordingly, the beginning poems include quarrels in heaven, as the proceeding ones show Crow's wanderings and encounters with different external and internal phenomena. Others, such as Patrick Jackson, have followed the same division with more elaboration on the maturity which Crow attains throughout the sequence. That is, Crow gradually grows "from a preverbal, egotistical creature [...] to a literate,

artistic, and empathetic one” (Jackson 76). Brown regards *Crow* as the dark side of Auden’s Ariel. He claims that *Crow* is a post-modernist harlequin “because – for all his own lethal greed – he stands as shocked witness to the global destructiveness of human history as modernity (81).

However, Hughes himself calls *Crow* “a story of spiritual romanticism”, and that is what initially paves the path for a worthwhile comparison. Now one might wonder what those terms mean: spiritual and romanticism. Harold Bloom may be one source for answering the question. In his triad on Romanticism, Shelley’s *Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), and Blake’s *Apocalypse* (1963), as well as in his most notable work, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom claims that the whole history of poetry writing has been a struggle, a battle, or a “competition” between the latecomer poets and their precursors (Fite 17). While modern poets suffer from belatedness, Bloom believes that they are greatly influenced by their antecedent poetic canon one way or another. Otherwise, they would have remained incapable of creating strong canonical poetry.

Poetic confrontations with the preceding works are manifested as a type of “fall”. In Bloomian terms, it is a swerve; a misprision. They are acts of misreading and misinterpreting a god-like poet, which Bloom accounts as a prerequisite for the ascension of a belated poet towards the realm of visionary imagination. This way, a

belated poet’s way of creating resembles a quest romance. That is, to Bloom, the very act of poetry writing is a journey toward a desirable objective which features an “agonistic” quality; a battle against poetic gods. Thus, as the belated poet develops his own universe, he always has this anxiety of being influenced by the poetic world of his precursors. As a result, if he wishes to do his job as a poet, he has to trespass the orders of that universe and revolt against its gods (creators). Under the shade of his vast Kabbalistic and Gnostic studies, Bloom determines six revisionary patterns or “ratios” to explain the relationship between latecomers and forefathers: “clinamen”, “tessera”, “kenosis”, “daemonization”, “askesis”, and “apophrades” (see Fite). For better manageability, the essay mainly focuses on the clinamen stage; however, other stages of Bloom’s “anxiety” also prove useful to be applied in any belated-forefather comparative study.

In this connection, this essay focuses mainly on Bloom’s initial stage, clinamen, by juxtaposing Hughes with Percy Bysshe Shelley and, to a lesser extent, with Blake and Milton in order to reveal how Hughes’s poetry in *Crow* is a revision of his precursors. In what follows, the essay clarifies the quest narrative feature of Romanticism, which is perfectly mapped in Shelley’s “*Alastor*” but, according to Bloom, can also be traced in a greater Romantic figure, Milton. This claim shall be explained in detail later. Next, the heroic features of Hughes’s character are

compared with the Romantic equivalents to explore how Hughes's bird of choice treats a ruling god and finally realizes he is quite attached to it. It is explained how this very selection of a black bird as a hero is a Bloomian poetic swerve or fall, and how Hughes's poetic persona is integrated with his character. Finally, this leads to comparing the myth of the crow to Shelley's famous allegory of the poet as a nightingale in "*A Defence of Poetry*". As such, the study endeavors to add to the existing Hughes-Romantics scholarship by offering a new interpretation of the *Crow* collection. In doing so, it highlights the mythopoetic qualities in Hughes under the light of Bloom's "anxiety," which places younger poets in relation to elders.

Crow: A Romantic Quest Narrative

If we want to reread the *Crow* sequence with a Romantic revisionist perspective (prescribed by Bloom), we have to pay attention to the quest romance Hughes embeds in his poetry. Initially, it is important not to misunderstand "romance" as a love story in the modern genre sense. As Hughes puts it in *Winter Pollen* (1994), the idea of romance is an attempt or a journey down "into that depth of imagination where understanding has its roots and stores its X-rays" (226). Put differently, it is a struggle to access the world of truths which demands a mythmaking process; a process "that can be seen to have its ancestry in, or to exist in a universe co-extensive with Romanticism" (Stigen

108). Accordingly, Bloom regards Homer's *The Odyssey* as the fundamental quest narrative and the first Romantic poem from which other romances derived influence (Bloom, *The Ringers* 3).

The quest narrative feature of Romanticism is intrinsically linked to metaphorical or ironical language. In Romantic theory, metaphor is assumed to be similar to the structure of a quest romance, given that it possesses truth and is inseparable from the idea of totality (Stigen 109). Moreover, the truth is only attainable through the flow of a journey, and does not reside in a predetermined destination. Simply put, a quest-taker is transformed and illumined by the visionary powers of imagination throughout his journey. He does not discover any particular form of truth outside himself at a destination. Similarly, metaphorical language functions in a way that its signified is not directly accessible to readers. It is rather through the similarities and other meaningful connections that we can comprehend the signified. In other words, we understand a metaphor throughout the process of reading, not directly and/or instantly. Hence, Hughes employs a metaphorical language, and this is ostensible in *Crow* from the very beginning as he shapes his hero (or anti-hero) out of blackness.

The mythic features of Hughes's poetic universe in *Crow* are developed early in the sequence. There is no wonder that if Hughes craves to make a new myth, he has to begin with a

story of creation. The initial poems, as Roberts notes, remind the reader of the biblical Genesis, and one of the late poems, "Littleblood", looks like "revelation". The first poem called "Two Legends", representing the metaphorical creation of *Crow*, begins with the mysterious word "black"; a synecdoche for *Crow*'s anatomy:

Black was the without eye

Black the within tongue

Black was the heart

Black the liver, black the lungs.

"Black" and "blackness" together are used (often anaphorically) more than fifteen times in a poem of less than twenty-five lines. Evidently, the color black captures the essence of "crowiness" – at least at first glance. On the surface, the ironical word "black" connotes despair, perhaps reflecting the suicides of Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill. However, Danny O'Connor extends this argument even further, asserting the ironical blackness speaks for the unconscious God/creator/poet:

Hughes conceives *Crow* as the product of God's nightmare, after the voice had mocked the sleeping God for the failure of his prize creation. God challenges the laughing voice of his nightmare to "do better": *Crow* is this attempt, a version of creation that emerges from God's unconscious. *Crow* is as independent from this unconscious as Adam is from God – he has as much free will. (68)

From this viewpoint, *Crow*'s creation out of blackness aligns perfectly with Bloom's idea of influence. To explain this, one has to note that the majority of Bloom's theories of anxiety of influence have been derived from his vast Kabbalistic studies. However, this does not mean that Bloom discusses Jewish mysticism or Manichaeism in *The Anxiety*. It is rather his specific way of viewing poetic influence that resembles Lurianic Kabbalah, especially the myth of creation, catastrophe, and revision. Therefore, a brief explanation of Manichean ideas can provide firm ground for better comprehending Hughes's possible purpose and Bloom's theory.

According to the cosmology of Manichaeans, there reside two main principles in the universe which suggest dualistic realms: the realm of the God of light and the realm of the ruler of darkness. The dark force, which is attributed to chaotic nature, dares to assault the realm of light. In response, the king of light creates Wisdom (equivalent to Sophia in Western Gnostic thought), who begets the primal man, known as Ohrmazd. It is Ohrmazd who descends to the mortal land (the realm of darkness) to battle against its ruler, but is defeated in the end.

Crow's creation out of utter darkness, hence, can connote such Manichean duality. He is the same as, or at least a part of, the daemonic realm; the chaotic nature. In "Two Legends", Hughes describes a hatching nestling who is quite helpless. Through a close reading, one can note

that he is hatching out of an “egg of blackness”, struggling to “suck in light” and “pronounce its sun”. Nevertheless, all of his attempts end in failure. These lines clearly show *Crow*’s immaturity and illiteracy as well as Hughes’s endeavor to render his mastery over mythmaking. However, his mythmaking indicates a poetic swerve which will be clarified later. This also echoes Jackson, who regards the entire volume as a story of “formation and maturation (75). To him, *Crow* is the hero who gradually matures and revolts against the orders of God to acquire singing/poetic powers by himself.

A possible interpretation is that *Crow*’s blackness stands precisely against the brightness of the sun; an agonistic reflection of his creator. *Crow* is the opposite side of birth and creation. He is chaos. He is death, and even regards himself stronger than death in “An Examination at the Womb-Door”. Just like the ruler of the dark in Manichaeism, he assails the sun by flying towards it in the way of Icarus. For attacking the sun, he has no justification but does so since “it glared much too whitely” (“*Crow*’s Fall”). However, the battle ends in failure as the sun remains bright while he returns “charred black”.

This is how *Crow*’s myth begins with a fall from orders. The following sections illustrate how the volume can be read as an allegory of poetic pilgrimage to visionary power or singing. Its hero represents Hughes’s poetic persona, and his courage to assail the sun, followed by failure, can

echo Bloom’s idea of misprision. In this sense, when a poet encounters a ruling power, he tries to ignore the existing rules by attacking them. Sooner or later, he discovers he has no way but to integrate the greater into his world if he wishes to succeed in writing enduring poetry. As Bloom puts it in his *Anxiety*, it is the return of the dead.

To further clarify the destination that Hughes’s *Crow* seeks in its pilgrimage, it is necessary to look back to his poetic forefathers again. So far, this study has attempted to explain how *Crow* features an internalized quest romance by focusing on its creation and rebellion. However, Hughes’s shamanic qualities and mythic vision are also in dialogue with a major Romantic father: William Blake. As a *Guardian* reviewer identifies Blake’s prophetic style as a significant mystical influence on Hughes, the relationship between Hughes and Blake warrants closer examination. In what follows, the study argues how *Crow*’s volume reframes Blake’s mythological universe – a universe which leads us back to Bloom and his studies of Romanticism.

O’Connor’s claim that the *Crow* is created out of unconsciousness is also in close relation with Blakean trinity of Ulro, Beulah, and Eternity. According to Blake’s hierarchal states of existence, the material world in which everything is concrete is a “fallen state”; a place he calls Ulro. Next lies the delightful state of Beulah. Although it is a realm of imagination and poetic inspiration, it must not be regarded as the ultimate reality that

a creative mind seeks. On the other hand, the truth and the state in which all aspects of the human soul come together in a harmonic way is a paradisaal state Blake calls Eden. Bloom argues that ascension to this last state is only possible through disturbance. That is, all “great Romantics [...] distrusted the Beulah of earthly repose, the natural garden of a world that [they] longed for. And, like [their] major contemporaries, [they] went on from it to a myth that promised a humanism that could transcend nature's illusions” (Bloom, *Visionary* 407).

Hughes's desire to transcend nature's illusions and to ascend towards Blake's Eternity is apparent in *Crow*'s journey. In the final lines of “Two Legends”, Blake's paradise is represented by a metaphorical rainbow:

To hatch a crow, a black rainbow
Bent in emptiness
Over emptiness
But flying.

Although it is oxymoronic at first sight, the phrase “a black rainbow” is of high significance, for it adds to the general romantic quality of the journey. This rainbow, which is bent “over emptiness,” can signify that Hughes's *Crow* is “flying” to it. Although the hero resides in an empty world at this point, he wishes to reach the visionary realm – presenting itself as a rainbow here; a rainbow that makes Wordsworth's heart leap and deem that his life has just begun upon seeing it: “So is it now [he] is a man” (*My Heart Leaps Up* 44). But in

order to reach Blake's Eternity, *Crow* should learn to reject the Beulah of earthly repose:

Words came with blank cheques –
He drew Minnie Mice on them.
Words came with Aladdin's lamp –
He sold it and bought a pie.
Words came in the likeness of vaginas in a
row – He called in his friends. (*The Battle of
Osfrontalis* 11)

Crow's other purpose in his quest is searching for a feminine counterpart to become unified with her. To do that, he has to become able to sing songs so that he can allure her. As previously mentioned by Jackson, the creature that once was incapable of exclaiming a single word gradually becomes more experienced in using words. In “A Disaster”, he witnesses the destructive power of a word, apparently declared by man, which turns into an “all mouth / Earless, eyeless” monster. This monster sucks human souls out of the planet “like the nipples of a sow”.

In “The Battle of *Osfrontalis*”, our much-matured hero playfully rejects the pitfalls and hazards of material cravings represented to him by words. As the invading words find themselves helpless to prevent *Crow* by tying him up in worldly goods, they retreat “Into the skull of a dead jester / Taking the world with them”. After a direct allusion to the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (1623), *Crow* remembers that it was he himself who “...had picked that skull empty” and had eaten all those “words, words, words”. Once

again, such a reference adds to the intense inwardness and psychological struggle Hughes's hero copes with on his romantic path.

The obsession with finding a female counterpart provides new opportunities to juxtapose Crow's quest with Shelley's "Alastor; or The Spirit of Solitude" (1816). From this perspective, a Bloomian revisionist reading gains significance as we shed a Shelleyan light on Hughes's hero and his quest. In other words, the main aim of this section is to clarify the ways in which Crow's hostility towards death and his desire to be eternalized by becoming One with a female can be reinterpreted under the influence of Shelley.

Romantic Heroic Qualities of Crow
Arguably, Shelley's "Alastor" is considered to be among his first poems. It is a narrative which posits its main character on a path of sublimity and transcendence. Leaving "his cold fireside" behind, Alastor makes his mind to depart and "seek strange truths in undiscovered lands". His trail, however, is not empty of perils. He has to pass through volcanoes with burning smoke and bitumen lakes if he wishes to enter a palace with "crystal columns, and clear shrines / Of pearl". After gazing at the ruins of Babylon and Jerusalem, he continues his journey – unnoticed that he himself is bearing the sublimity he is seeking. His bright eyes make an Arab maiden fall in love with him and cause an innocent infant to retreat. Such a glowing visage, however, goes

vacant as he visions the fairest lady of his lifetime in a dream. Unsuccessful in winning her hand and heart in the dream, Alastor begins a futile search, hoping to rediscover the pleasure he once experienced in the dream. His struggles, however, end in failure, and he perishes in solitude tragically.

It is significant to initially note that the God in "Alastor", same as in *Crow*, has been attributed with natural elements and feminine characteristics: Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood! / If our great Mother has imbued my soul / With aught of natural piety to feel...". Furthermore, the speaker's tone in the very opening stanza has evident qualities of a religious prayer. Similar to the beginning lines of Milton's monumental epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667), in which Milton requests assistance from a Spirit or a "Heavenly Muse" to sing and illuminate "what in [him] is dark", Shelley's speaker asks a divine power for an insight. He beseeches the divine world to bestow the required poetic power. The role of Milton is significant here, since Bloom posits him alongside Spenser as a major forefather from whom the Romantics also derived influence. In other words, Milton is a forefather from whom Shelley receives influence here. As Fite asserts:

Bloom's enterprise is what the Miltonic inspiration of clinamen might suggest: an attempt to read Romanticism not only forward to our own time, but also backward to the time of its origins in the

great age of Milton and, to a lesser extent, Spenser. Spenser's Gardens of Adonis in *The Faerie Queene* loom formidably as a source for all Romantic pastoral. (60)

Shelleyan divine force has been attributed with more elemental and natural forces compared to the rational muse in Milton's epic. This demonstrates two distinctive worldviews of divinity. In order to make his prayer more effective and his position more secure, Shelley's speaker begs for absolution for the injuries he might have caused against his Mother :

If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast
I consciously have injured, but still loved
And cherished these my kindred; then
forgive. This boast, beloved brethren, and
withdraw
No portion of your wonted favour now! (23)

However, our Hughesian counterpart acts against these lines, given that *Crow's* relations with his mother/creator do not suggest any kind of reverence. He harms his mother either directly or through his interventions in matters quite unrelated to him. In a sense, *Crow* is a main character who goes rogue soon after his creation, and it takes time for him to grow. Thus, it can be observed how the relationship between the creator and the created has undergone considerable alteration. This tradition, according to Bloom, is originated with Milton, and has been continued by Shelley and Hughes in later centuries:

When *Crow* cried his mother's ears
Scorched to a stump.

When he laughed, she wept

Blood her breast her palms her brow all wept
blood.

He tried a step, then a step and again a step –
Every one scarred her face forever (23).

This is not the only time that *Crow* shows malignancy. In "*Crow's* First Lesson", we read about a newly-born creature in a preverbal state who is incapable of expressing a single word of "love". Every time the God tries to teach him how to exclaim the word, a disaster is gaped out of *Crow's* mouth: "a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito". Shelley's hero, on the other hand, perfectly knows what it means by love and offers his genuine affections to his creator: "Favour my solemn song, for I have loved / Thee ever, and thee only". He is also familiar with the creator's mysteries since his heart "ever gazes on the depth" of them. Contrary to this, *Crow* has to unveil many mysteries by himself throughout his growth and maturation so that he would be able to sing his ultimate "Lovesong"; a song which is an emblem of poetic thought and creation.

Like *Crow*, the heavy shadow of death and the risk of perishing on the path toward unity with the beloved is an evident theme in *Alastor*. The poem begins with the idea of death, as the speaker makes his bed "in charnels and on coffins." Neither do "human hands with pious reverence" carry his coffin, nor does any "mourning maiden"

weep, nor does any bard sigh melodiously over “his dark fate.” In a broader sense, Shelley’s speaker suggests that the entire poem is a song of how “He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude,” which resonates with the title Hughes chooses for his sequence, *From the Life and Songs of the Crow*.

We see how Shelleyan hero gradually prepares for a journey as his early youth ends and – like a bird who resolves to leave the nest – he decides to leave his comfort zone. Hence, he is a lone wanderer who is “Obedient to high thoughts”. He becomes a watcher and lingers “among the ruined temples” pondering “on memorials / Of the world’s youth”. Finally, he gazes and keeps gazing at the ruins “till meaning on his vacant mind / Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw / The thrilling secrets of the birth of time”.

The trace of such sublime visionary moments early in the beginning of a hero’s journey is not limited to “*Alastor*”. Indeed, it is rooted in the work of a greater figure from whom both latecomers, Shelley and Hughes, have derived inspiration: Milton. It is quite accepted among Hughesian scholars that *Crow* is filled with pseudo-biblical stories. These parodies are rooted in the stories of Genesis that all add to the allusiveness of this collection. However, from a poetic revisionist pole, what makes *Crow* more significant than its biblical allusions is the way it slightly echoes *Paradise Lost* as it reunites the

biblical Fall and rebellion of Lucifer with the power of the poetic imagination.

As previously noted, to Bloom, the greatest fathers of romanticism and pastoral poetry are Milton and Spenser. These are the fathers who have been inspiring the Romantics one way or another and could bring them together as one of the great traditions of English poetry. Hughes, as a more recent latecomer, also proves that he has been successful in continuing this cycle of influence and revision as he writes “*Crow and Mama*” in this way:

And it was cosy in the rocket, he could not
see much

But he peered out through the portholes at
Creation

And saw the stars millions of miles away

And saw the future and the universe

Opening and opening (7)

Seeing or foreseeing mysteries – including the future of humanity – is a common ability which *Crow* shares with the Miltonic Adam and Shelleyan hero. In Books IX and XII of *Paradise Lost*, Adam sees a prophetic vision of what will happen to his descendants – a vision begun with Cain and Abel, extended to the story of Noah’s Ark, and finally to the birth of Christ, whose sacrifice redeems humankind.

The difference between *Crow*’s vision and Adam’s, however, drastically resides in the procedures and paths they take that finally leave them with such visionary images. Although both

characters are able to see such things after experiencing a fall from the grace of a father-like (as in Milton) or a mother-like (as in Hughes) God, they see the future by different means. In Milton's more Bible-oriented universe, this is the Archangel Michael who shows such scenes to Adam while in Hughes's more unorthodox world, Crow peers "out through the portholes" of the rocket, which "its trajectory / [is] Drilled clean through her (God's) heart" ("Crow and Mama"). In other words, there is no divine or angelic power to provide the hero with such sights. It seems that it is only technological advancements and a world of "words" and "numbers" that have bestowed Crow with such an ability. However, his rocket finally crashes on the moon, where he finds himself back with his mother, realizing that there is an entity known as God outside of himself.

That Crow revolts against a God and tries to trespass its regulations offers a new perspective to regard Hughes's character as a representative of his poetic persona. This reconsideration once again connects us to Bloom. That is, if Hughes, as a latecomer, struggles to react against a precedent tradition to create a poetic universe, his character is also mirroring this struggle. As mentioned above, Crow's ultimate purpose is to become integrated with a beloved godlike character. Therefore, he is in search of maturation and learning to sing sweet songs. His desires are quite similar to a poet's. This is how the entire Crow volume should be read as a poetic myth which

revises traditional ideals of mythmaking. Hughes and *Crow*: Nightingales in Disguise

When the eagle soared clear through a dawn
 When the owl sailed clear of tomorrow's
 conscience
 And the goldfinch bulbed in the sun
 And the wryneck crooked in the moon
 Crow spraddled head down in the beach-
 garbage,
 guzzling a dropped ice-cream (31)

These are the lines through which Hughes renders his ornithology — highlighting and distinguishing his bird of choice among other fowls. If Hamlet is the king of the dead in the final scene, Crow is a "King of Carrion" who is made of "nothing", and lies "cataleptic" in his throne scaffold with bones ("Conjuring in Heaven"). In silence, he rules over an "empty world" from his "palace of skulls". It is he who has been struggling to sing like a nightingale for his beloved and finally discovers that "love is hard to stop" ("Lovesong").

As discussed in the previous section, the character of Crow serves as an allegory for a poet and a representation of Hughes's poetic persona. This interpretation associates Crow with Romanticism by echoing Shelley's famous emblem of the poet as a nightingale. In "A Defence of Poetry" (1840), Shelley elaborates on the spontaneous and inspiring song of poets who are unconscious of their artistry using metaphorical language. A poet, he argues, "is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to

cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (49).

In British Romantic tradition, among many fowls, nightingales have been of considerable significance. Etymologically, in ancient times, nightingales and poets have famously been considered the same, because the Greek word for nightingale, *aëdon*, also means singer. Before thrushes came to symbolize hope and jubilation for Browning, Hopkins, and Hardy, nightingales were regarded as “communicants and celebrants of the Absolute Beauty” (Ford 570). A nightingale in a cage is the image that Shelley compares Emilia Viviani to in his *Epipsychidion* (1821), and he laments her imprisonment done by her parents. In *Adonais* (1821), he even compares Keats’s spirit to a nightingale. As it returns “to the burning fountain”, his voice is heard again “not in human metrical patterns, but in all the voices of deathless Nature: ‘the moan / Of thunder’ and ‘the song of night’s sweet bird’” (Ford 571). Here, the spirit manages to become integrated with nature as if the thunder and the nightingale are nature's vocal artists; they are nature’s “poets”.

Hughes’s choice of a disagreeable, harsh-voiced bird and the elevation of it toward transcendence connects to Bloom’s theory of misprision in *The Anxiety*. To begin with, I discuss that the very act of choosing a black bird, which is famously associated with death, tolling

bells, and cemeteries, indicates a denial of Romantic or Shelleyan ideals. But before analyzing Shelley and Hughes based on their favorite birds, I would like to state the reason I have brought the Shelleyan nightingale to my analysis instead of the Keatsian one.

Shelley’s nightingale is preferred to Keats’s in this section because it sustains the identification between the poet and the bird better. In Shelley, the bird is more internalized, given that it is far more than an emblem of aesthetic transcendence. It is primarily integrated with the poetic spirit as shown in *Adonais* and “A Defence of Poetry”. However, in Keats’s famous “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), the bird functions differently, meaning that it signifies an escape from the mortality of which the speaker is aware. In other words, Keats’s nightingale remains an object of contemplation while Shelley’s singing bird develops into a subject – an allegory for continued poetic creativity and visionary power. The inwardness of Shelley’s bird connects us better to *Crow*’s primary quest, which is internal and psychological.

Another element in Shelley’s nightingale that serves the Hughes-Shelley comparison concerns the way it represents natural harmony against the destructive rationality of humans. Years before *Adonais*, in “The Woodman and the Nightingale” (1818), the dichotomy of harmony and chaos is addressed in the opening lines. The woodman’s heart is “rough” and “out of tune”.

The speaker even wonders whether such hearts have ever come to good. Suddenly, a jubilant nightingale in distant woods:

Satiate the hungry dark with melody.
And as a vale is watered by a flood,
Or as the moonlight fills the open sky
Struggling with darkness—as a tuberose
Peoples some Indian dell with scents
which lie

Like clouds above the flower from which
they rose,

The singing of that happy nightingale
In this sweet forest, from the golden close
Of evening till the star of dawn may fail,
Was interfused upon the silentness;

The folded roses and the violets pale

Heard her within their slumbers; ... (336)

However, even hearing the nightingale does not transform the passive destructive soul in the woodman. His return from the felling with axe and saw in hand could signal nothing but violation. He stands against the natural energies of which the nightingale sings, because he is the one who cuts down “tall treen” – each a “wood-nymph”.

Contrary to Shelley, Hughes's character does not feature any transcendental characteristics – at least in the beginning of the volume. He comes from the chaotic demonic side of nature and is a representative of social predicaments after the Second War. He is an untamed newcomer to the world who has been created out of nightmarish screams and chaotic darkness. If we want to place

him somewhere in Shelley's nightingale-woodman dichotomy, his features – especially his survival and killing instincts – are more similar to the woodman's. Nevertheless, a sense of remorse and a desire for ascension are within Crow's heart, especially as he proceeds along his trail and comes upon his first crucial dilemma. In “That Moment”, Crow starts searching for something to eat. In “Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door”, he finds a dead mole and slowly takes it apart. Finally, in “Crow Tyrannosaurus” he begins to weep as he ponders eating:

Crow thought Alas

Alas ought I

To stop eating

And try to become the light?

But his eye 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. (35)

If Hughes's character shows even a scintilla of remorse through his weeping, Shelley's woodman is depicted as so remorseless that he appears to have no possibility of redemption. Therefore, the selection of Crow as the main hero indicates a fall

and a denial of Romantic ideals. Now that much has been said of sweet-singing birds, what remains to be said of the hideous carrion fowls? From Bloom's perspective, this choice is the ignition of a flux of influences Hughes received as he continued writing. In other words, this selection gradually paves the path for other stages of Bloomian anxiety which demand further scholarship and cannot be analyzed in the present essay. However, to support this claim further, the resonance of Bloom's final stage, Apophrades, can be heard in the final poems of Crow.

After so many vicissitudes, in "Lovesong" and in an ambiguous setting, Crow finds himself triumphant in having an intercourse with the beloved. He wakes up in the morning and figures out that he has put on her face as she has masked herself with his face. Crow's lust has been satisfied, at least in a visionary sense like Alastor. But still, he is quite unable to sing his actual song for the Nature (the feminine God):

"O leaves," Crow sang, trembling, "O leaves" —

The touch of a leaf's edge at his throat
Guillotined further comment.

Nevertheless

Speechless he continued to stare at the leaves

Through the god's head instantly
substituted. (Glimpse 23)

In the end, however, it becomes evident that Crow's wisdom is the result of draining from

"death's mouldy tits". Sitting on the finger of his creator in his finale, "Littleblood", he sings into his ears. This last poem, which is an ode, is written from the perspective of Crow's beloved, addressing him to begin singing. The hero ultimately discovers his desired one and sings to her. On his path, he has transformed into a chimeric animal too, as if each new organ of his is a part of all he has seen. However, the essence of him, the little blood has remained the same. In the end, he who had initially regarded death as the primary peril on his path owes his singing power to it. The power of death which perishes Alastor and kills the wood-nymphs, enables Crow with the needed voice to sing:

O littleblood, drumming in a cow's skull

Dancing with a gnat's feet

With an elephant's with a crocodile's tail.

Grown so wise grown so terrible

Sucking death's mouldy tits

Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O
littleblood.

Eventually, Crow becomes mature and literate. From a Shelleyan perspective, the force which enables the hero with the ability of singing here is the harmony he finds in a world of chaos. He learns how to perceive and express them under the light of his imaginative mind (Shelley 45). It is the same power that gives Crow wisdom and makes Alastor perish in solitude like a forlorn nightingale singing for its rose. Although in his letters to Kieth Sagar it is quite apparent that Hughes had the

blueprint of a third section and a happy ending in *Crow*, he never published it and decided to somehow finish the sequence here.

It is *Crow* in the end, who becomes able to pass through the stages of his quest and say “words”. Although the sequence remains unfinished with its hero deprived of seeing a happy ending, one has to consider Hughes triumphant in creating an all-new mythical universe out of conscious or unconscious influences taken from the Romantic tradition. As Shelley confirms: “every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification” (47). This way, why one should not be able to regard Hughes a nightingale who sings in solitude and darkness of a cruel world made by vicious mankind? Thus, harmony, in a Shelleyan sense, is derived out of seeing orders in a chaotic world of impressions that we are surrounded with. In Hughes’s case, it leads into creating a masterpiece which has undergone multiple reinterpretations and scholarship until recently.

Conclusion

The essay has sought to highlight the poetic myth in Hughes’s *Crow* and to reread it from a Bloomian perspective in relation to the Romantic tradition. As an ahistoricist critic, Bloom appears gender-biased; however, his criteria for analysis are distinctive and influential. In the preface to *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra M.

Gilbert and Susan Gubar acknowledge Bloom’s influence on their decision to reread nineteenth-century women’s writing as an attempt to escape a male-dominated literary tradition – what Gertrude Stein termed “patriarchal poetry” (Preface). Similarly to this article, their primary reason for engaging with Bloom lies in his conception of literary history as a dynamic scene marked by forceful action and inevitable reaction.

Through composing *Crow* poems, it can be understood that Hughes, either consciously or unconsciously, has followed certain patterns in developing his own mythopoetic world. His more modern and innovative way of writing, although seems quite fragmented and bleak, manifests a longing for harmony as the poems evolve page after page alongside of their hero. Under the shade of a Bloomian premise, we see how the preverbal *Crow* reflects the poetic persona of Hughes in relation to the antecedent poetic orders and canon. We can observe how *Crow* endeavors to trespass the conventional orders, scorches his mother’s ears with his cries, tries new words, listens to the songs of other birds, and finally manages to create a love song of his own and find out that the ultimate goal he is seeking is not separated from him, but is within himself.

From a Bloomian revisionist perspective, therefore, we can conclude Hughes’s approach towards a forefather, in this case Shelley and to lesser extent Blake and Milton, resembles his hero’s encounters with a mother-like God notably.

Passionate about creating his own poetic universe based on his particular worldview, Hughes, same as other latecomers, finds out that he is unable to neutralize the influential shadow of his precursors. By rereading selected poems of *Crow*, we observed how beautifully Hughes misreads Shelley and enables himself to trespass the harmonic orders of the previous canon. Hence, we observed how all these swerves and falls were for the sake of redefining harmony in a modern way which although might seem fragmented on surface, it is quite self-sufficient in following its own rules since it is an independent poetic universe.

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