

An Analysis of Ted Hughes's Children's Poetry from the Perspective of Primitivism

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Abstract: Through analyzing Ted Hughes's children's poetry from the perspective of primitivism, including interpreting the primitive personality of the intended juvenile audience, different animal images, multiple sensuous language and serene recurrence of farming, this thesis verifies that Hughes's childlike nakedness of perception leads to a arbitrary combination of images which suggests a kind of primitive mode of thinking; Hughes's instinctive ardent love of animals reflects the appreciation of the primitive world and the alienation of modern society; the sensory expression liberates readers to embrace the primitive natural world and even reaches to the integrity of subjective internal world and objective external world. In conclusion, this thesis concludes that through interpreting the multiple levels of his children's poetry, readers can understand the primitive characteristic as well as the defamiliarization in Ted Hughes's poetic creation.

Keywords: Ted Hughes; Primitivism; Children's Poetry

1. Introduction

1.1 Ted Hughes and His Poetry

Ted Hughes, an eminent and prolific British laureate poet who writes fiction, drama, short stories, essays, and letters, is hailed as the most influential postwar poet of the second half of the twentieth century. Considering the intended audience, his volumes of poetry can be divided into two categories: adult poems and children's poems, such as *Moortown* (1980), *Riverm* (1984) and *Wolfwatching* (1991), *The Cat and the Cuckoo* (1987), and *The Mermaid's Purse* (1993).

Summarizing previous and current studies on his poetry, they mainly focus on Ted Hughes's poetic techniques, themes and images, romanticism, ecocriticism and even involve Ted Hughes's personal experience. Critics and scholars conclude that among all the studies of Ted Hughes's poetry, analyzing their artistic features and ecological functions are outstanding and draws readers attention easily.

However, few of researchers quest for Ted Hughes's children's poetry, not to mention the primitivism in it. Since primitivism bloomed in the eighteenth century Europe and in the nineteenth century American and artists have tendencies to go back to the antiquated permanent habits during their aesthetic creation, and having the latent talent of imagination, creativity, sensitivity with the individual experience of closing to nature and animal, Ted Hughes reflects the primitivism in his children's poetry perfectly. Therefore, this thesis argues the primitivism in Ted Hughes's children's poetry by analyzing his childlike mode of thinking, intimated with animal images, sensuous use of expression and the glorification of past, especially his hometown, Western Yorkshire.

2. Primitivism in Ted Hughes's Children's Poems

2.1 Childlike Mode of Thinking

Firstly readers should know why are the children's poems not the adults' poems related to the primitivism? John Moulin answers this question in his book that : For Hughes, the childhood world offers possibilities that he found largely lost to an adult outlook. He thought of it as a world of excitement, not just a miniature world of naive novelties and limited reality but

still very much the naked process of appreciation, far less conditioned than ours, far more fluid and alert, far closer to the real laws of its real nature^[5].

In other words, the intended children or juvenile audience possess a characteristic of primitive personality: “nakedness of perception”^[2]. For example, in *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, Ted Hughes depicts a picture of cows wandering in the lane at a full moon night from an imaginary vision of little Frieda. In this poem, Frieda sees the body of cows like “a dark river of blood”, their white spots like “many boulders”, and their warm breath like wreaths “looping the hedges”^[1]. These creative imagination reflects that children watch, feel and express everything in a casual but natural way.

It also means that children concentrate on themselves much more than on others, as the famous Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget mentions that children’s thought is egocentric, thus, they are accustomed to mixing up reality and imagination. For instance, in the poem of *The Hen*, Hughes writes that “She flaps her wings, like shallow egg-baskets”^[1]. The poet uses the word ‘shallow’ and ‘egg-basket’ not only to show the real flat and imaginary broad characteristic of hen’s wings vividly but also stirring the real egg basket with the imaginary wings habitually.

Besides, this illogical thinking makes children combine different or unrelated images arbitrarily. For example, in *New Foal*, Ted Hughes portrays the birth of a foal like this:

Suddenly he’s here---a warm heap
Of ashes and embers, fondled by small draughts
A star dived from outer space – flared
And burned out in the straw
Now something is stirring in the smoulder
We call it a foal^[1].

Except children, no one would relate an animal’s birth to ashes and star together. It shows the shapeless of children’s imagination and leads the poet to “a renewed vision of life’s sacredness and harmony”^[4].

There is another instance can illustrate the arbitrary mind of children in the *Musk-Ox* taken from *Under the North Star*:

A little castle with two windows
Like a fish on the bed of flood river^[1].

Ted shows the arbitrary feature of children’s imagination in these two lines vividly. By using the nouns of ‘fish’ and ‘flood river’, Ted displays the unsteadily state and long history of the castle artfully.

Due to his original, unlimited, even ridiculous descriptions from the children’s perspective, Hughes’s childlike, fantastic and faithful to children’s nature are demonstrated obviously as well as a distinctive sense of primitive beauty silently.

2.2 Ardent love of Animal Images

Referring to Ted Hughes, he was born in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, where the marshland scenery and the hunting experience with his brother made him to be more close to animals as well as influenced his later poetic creation a lot. It means that for Hughes, poetic creation is similar to his childhood memory of hunting, therefore he chooses many animal images that are suitable for the younger readers in his poetry.

Different from the cruel, violent, bloody animal images in the adult poetry, Ted Hughes employs many docile, common and vulnerably animals in children’s poetry. For instance, in his first volume for children, *Meet My Folks*, Ted Hughes imagines himself as a 7-year-old child, and introduces his family members as different animals: my sister is a crow, my maternal grandmother is an octopus, my aunt has green fingers and so on.

Generally, people regard flies as a dirty, boresome, unwelcome little thing. While Ted Hughes describes the fly as a garbage engineer for children. In this poem, the fly looks like an old, diligent pedant, wearing a pair of glasses and using a microscope to observe the speck whenever and wherever he finds out.

Hughes also choose the delicate animal to imply the defamiliarization of human society, to show his primitive tendency, just as what he depicts in *The Hare*:

The Hare is a very fragile thing.

The life in the hare is a glassy goblet,
and her yellow-fringed frost-flake belly says: Fragile^[1].

In this poem, Hughes uses different adjectives and nouns with similar meanings, like “glassy goblet” and “frost-flake belly”, to show the vulnerable life and body of the hare, especially in the human society. Besides, the hare is described like food at the table and has got to tolerate it in this poem.

By portraying those lively, lovable but vulnerable animal images, Hughes’s children’s poetry not only reflect the beauty of primitive world, but also suggest that children’s pure thinking reveals a sort of potential alienation of the modern world which is glutted with rationality, utilitarianism, and mechanization.

2.3 Sensuous Use of Language

Furthermore, children’s love of animal causes them to express their sensory power freely. And in Hughes’s children’s poetry, the five senses perform in the languages are related to primitivism.

Referring to the sensory use of language, Ted Hughes says that “as a writer for the young, train yourself to see, hear, feel taste and smell in words”, for writers, the poem is like an living animal or creature, which is “an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit”^[6]. Only applying these alive words, “like which we hear, like ‘click’ or ‘chuckle’, or which we see, like ‘freckled’ or ‘veined’, or which we taste, like ‘vinegar’ or ‘sugar’, or touch, like ‘prickle’ or ‘oily’, or smell, like ‘tar’ or ‘onion’, poets can express the aesthetic sense of poem ^[1].

In terms of the sense of hear, Ted Hughes depicts the skillful knit of Grandma in the poem like this: “her needles tick like fifty clocks”^[3]. Through employing the audible word “tick” and the number “fifty”, readers know how fast, fluent and frequent the Grandma has ever knitted.

Ted Hughes also describes the sense of seeing in *The Harvest Moon*:

The flame-red moon, the harvest moon,
Rolls along the hills, gently bouncing,
A vast balloon,
Till it takes off, and sinks upward
To lie in the bottom of the sky, like a gold doubloon^[1].

Through describing the “flamed-red” color of the moon, the rolling, the form and size of it, children almost see this harvest moon as well as read this poem in the meantime.

Besides, the sense of touch embodies in *A March Calf*. Ted Hughes employs the personification to portray the neat, smooth hair of a calf in the following verse:

Right from the start he is dressed in his best – his blacks and his whites
Little Fauntleroy – quiffed and glossy,
A Sunday suit, a wedding natty get-up,
Standing in dunged straw ^[1].

In this poem, the calf is personified as a gentleman who dressed the black coat with a white tie. His hair is sleek and tidy. By using the personified figure of speech, it seems that children see the clothes, touch the hair of this cute calf. While it is surprised to find that Ted Hughes displays all of the five senses in the selected stanza or lines of [Hay](#).

From the view of children, Ted Hughes liberates people’s primitive sensory perception, which has been constrained and restrained in the modern society for a long time. By this naive, intuitive method, people not can embrace, feel the outer natural world, but reach to the integrity of subjective internal world and objective external world at the same time.

3. Conclusion

Through analyzing the primitivism in Ted Hughes’s children’s poetry, this thesis verifies that the childlike nakedness of perception leads to an arbitrary combination of images; Hughes’s instinctive ardent love of animals reflects the appreciation of the primitive world and the alienation of modern society; the sensory expression liberates themselves to embrace the primitive natural world and even reaches to the integrity of subjective internal world and objective external world. In

conclusion, this thesis summarizes that through interpreting the multiple levels of his children's poetry, readers can understand the primitive characteristic as well as the defamiliarization in Ted Hughes's poetic creation so that accomplish the poet's aesthetic goal.

References

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