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The Poetic Sensibility of Modern and Post-Modern Age and the Resurrection of the English Sensibility by Ted Hughes through His Unique 'Re-living of Experiences'

V. Vasanthi, Ph.D.



Ted Hughes

On Poetic Sensibility

The poetic sensibility is the way in which poets create an attitude for themselves through connections they establish with man and nature. It can be defined as the way their experience, emotions and sensations are tuned according to the changing colours, moods of the natural world and the circumstances acting on them. For every poet, it is also the peculiar way in which they express their reaction to the various experiences that are common to all men. The Bloomsbury guide to English Literature defines sensibility thus:

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For the poet of sensibility feeling appears as an end in itself, rather than part of some larger political or aesthetic design... when they (the poets) are not expressing the eternal truths of religion or the human lot, they aim to touch the feelings through ornamental elegance or evocative description. (Simmons 236)

Therefore a poet, whose works incorporate a fine sensibility, which is an intense emotional involvement with the poetic subject, can be called a 'poet of sensibility'. In the case of such a poet, the poetic subject becomes the experience by itself and the poetic themes are not deliberately stated, but are made to be experienced and felt by the reader. The poems are felt in such a way that the reader lives the experience of the author which can be termed as 're-living of experiences.' This is different from the 'sensuousness' of a poem in the sense that the latter is considered to exist in a few poems in which a particular phrase or more than a phrase are found to be sensuous. But 're-living of experiences' happens when the entire poem along with its more sensuous parts enable a recreation of the entire experience as a whole. As a result, the poems are found as fragments of actual experiences lived by the poet, to be re-lived by the readers.

The Sensibility of the Modern Age

The sensibility of the modern age is marked by an experience, which is largely single and unified. The modern poets resorted to a practical form of poetry and abandoned lavish imagination and dream like setting. This sensibility reduced the inspired jargon formation to simple prose-like word structure in the poems. The main motive of the modern poetry was to highlight the feelings of the society and the people around the world. The norms governing the poetic structure were given less importance. A new trend was set in which the relationship between the poet and the reader was valued more than ever before. Therefore in the modern sensibility, the poet was aware of an audience, which paved way for a number of deliberate changes in the substance of poetry. The audience was no longer scholars and well-learned men, but common people. Here, the poems were directed towards the common mass and the whole mankind. The medium of expression changed from the poet's personality to objectivity. David Daiches explains the medium of expression thus:

The poet has, not a personality' to express but a particular medium (...), in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways... If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is semi-ethical criterion of sublimity' misses the mark (1123).

Postmodern Sensibility

The postmodern sensibility, in one sense, can be considered as a continuation of the modern. The poets were emulating the modernists in their deliberate poetization with respect to an

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audience. The sincerity in dealing with an experience increased in the post-modern period. The normal and banal themes were dealt in a new mode of treatment. The urban world and the evil associated with it were dealt as such in the poetry. The response to the natural world became remote, as the urbanisation was in progress. The poets were more occupied with men's problems than their relationship to the passive non-human world. The sensibility had changed considerably from the romantic period in which the non-human world becomes active. Also, the poets of this sensibility experienced a dullness and boredom, which were never found before in poetry.

The psychic aspect was not explored fully by the poets. The Movement poets like Thom Gunn and Philip Larkin were not free from a psychic numbing which has been described in the previous chapter. The alienation was another drawback found in the modern and postmodern poems. In the poem titled, 'Home is so sad' written by Phillip larkin, such alienation can be traced as under:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,

Shaped to the comfort of the last to go

As if to win them back. (qtd. In Whalen 27)

Hughe's Sensibility – Restoration of the Lost Greatness of English Poetry

At this stage, Hughes' sensibility came as a restoration of the lost greatness in English poetry. Hughes's sensibility, apart from imparting the lost glory to the English literary scene, added its unique contribution to the post-modern sensibility. Hughes effected a revival of the 'Romantic sensibility' in which the limitations like ego and pathetic fallacy were successfully overcome. Keith Sagar, a popular critic of Ted Hughes certifies this more or less when he appreciates Hughes's poetry for its resurrection of the English sensibility, thus:

... having found his bearings and standards in his earlier work Hughes has come more and more to concern himself in his poems with the failure of English Intelligence and sensibility in the modern world, the causes and results of that alienation from the sources of life which characterizes our civilization and the mass neurosis of our urban society. (143)

A Process of Evocation

The 'reliving of experiences' in Hughes's poetry is a process of an evocation of a sincere experience, which replaces the description of a poetic subject. The experiences are re-lived by the readers, every time the poems are read. The words are found to be used appropriately and no exaggerations found. The readers find fragments of actual experiences as poems. The sensibility of Hughes differs from that of other poets of his age in this aspect, which can be

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further reinforced by the discussion of his most popular poem, 'The Thought-Fox' in the following lines.

About the poem, the poet himself comments: "As it is, every time I read the poem the fox comes up again out of the darkness and steps into my head" (qtd. in Scammel 20). Various critics have discussed this poem and it is a perfect example of an incorporation of the concept of 're-living the experience' as the readers gradually enter the experience and become one with it at some point of time as the following lines from the poem indicate: "cold, delicately as the dark snow/ A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;" (9-10). This sensuous description of the fox makes the presence of the fox felt by the readers. Thus, a personal experience of the author is perceived in a lively fashion, which becomes personal to the reader also. Hughes presents his actual intense experience in the crudest form.

Three Categories of Sensibility

This sensibility of presenting the experience is of three categories:

1. A casual presentation of an experience in a casual tone, irrespective of the seriousness of the theme.
2. Vivid presentation of a profound experience which leads to a chain of thoughts.
3. The experience of a poem dreamt, resulting in psychic thought process.

The experiences are sometimes connected to the physical world and sometimes to the spiritual world. Lawrence R. Ries says that the Experiences are connected with the unconscious element of man. He says: "(...) the experience and emotions that control his poems are frequently those that we share with animals, and these are evoked 'as in a dream' more often than they are explored" (280).

Sun Stroke – Working of the Unconscious Mind

These experiences may be deep rooted in the workings of the unconscious mind, but not all experiences are related to the unconscious factor. They deal with physical experiences too. The following poem, 'Sunstroke' (NSP 42) can be assessed for this quality.

The poem, 'Sunstroke' makes the readers live an experience of sunstroke, and this intensely evokes the sunstroke every time it is read. Though the entire account of the sunstroke is a metaphor, the experience does not suffer any artificiality or dearth of sincerity. The poem opens thus: "frightening the blood in its tunnel/The mowing machine ate at the field of grass"(1-2). The experience of the sunstroke appears at this point and it is accompanied by a numbing of senses and the author's blood congeals in fear. The phrase 'mowing machine'

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produces a sensuous buzz of the activity that invades the head, as the machine does to the field. The experiences of the narrator, thus becomes that of the reader too as the following lines read:

My eyes had been glared dark. Through a red heat

The cradled guns, Damascus, blued, flared-

At every stir sliding their molten embers

Into my head. (3-6)

Focusing on Individual Experience – Heat and Rain Interchanged

The author's eyes glare in the sunstroke and immense heat enters his body. In this vivid portrayal of an experience, Hughes caters to the individual experience. It continues with a sensuous description of the heat entering the body through the sunstroke. The experience enters deeper in the following lines thus: "reek of paraffin oil and creosote/ Swabbing my lungs doctored me back/ laid on a sack in the great-beamed engine-shed (11-13). The immense heat pours inside the author like a 'reek of paraffin oil' and heats his lungs. Voices around him came out of the pit and appeared to be warm as the veins lay healing. A subsequent rain is described and though treated like a metaphor, it brings more liveliness to the experience.

Dulled in a pit, heard thick walls of rain

And voices in swaddled confinement near me

Warm as veins. I lay healing(15-17)

The rain is only heard and not felt by the author as his body is numbed due to the immense heat caused by the sunstroke. Thus a gradual recovery from the sunstroke is experienced as well in the poem.

New Year – The Suffering River

Another poem 'New Year' (River 18), rich in imagination, forces its way into the readers' mind. The view of frozen river brings about a thought of a Caesarean operation in his mind, which is vivid and lively. The poem has been quoted in full length as under:

Snow falls on the Salmon redds. Painful

To think of the river tonight-suffering itself.

I imagine a Caesarian

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The wound's hapless mouth, a vital loss
Under the taut mask, a vital loss
Under the taut mask, on the heaped bed.
The silent to-fro hurrying of the nurses,
The bowed stillness of surgeons,
A trickling in the hush. The intent steel
Stitching the frothing womb, in its raw hole.
And walking in the morning in the blue glare of the ward
I shall feel in my head the anaesthetic,
The stiff gauze, the congealments, I shall see
The gouged patient sunk in her trough of coma-
The lank, dying fish. But not the ticking egg.(1-14)

A Caesarean Operation of the River

The author is looking at a frozen river in the winter and the scene brings the thought of a caesarean operation in his mind. The freezing river is felt like a congealment of blood. The silence associated with the atmosphere of the frozen river is sensuously associated with that which prevails in the hospital during a caesarean operation. Due to the depth of the experience, the anaesthetic feeling can also be experienced. Though the entire process is a metaphor, it gains more important and focus than the main object, the river. The 'wound's hapless mouth', 'a trickling in the hush' and the 'anaesthetic' feeling in the head are all, conducive to produce the effect. 'The ward', 'stiff gauze', 'the gouged patient in her trough of coma' all create a scene of a painful labour-room that further intensify the experience.

Re-living the Experience

Thus, it can be said that some poems of Hughes show a quality in which the poems persuade the readers to re-live the experience. Therefore Hughes's sensibility is fundamentally associated with an experience and these experiences form the basis of poetry in his works. It can also be further observed that the subject of experience gains more importance and the narrator himself and that they are never contrived but spontaneous and natural. The experiences are also common to mankind and are brought about by appropriate words and phrases.

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