

Wodwo by Ted Hughes

Brief Biography of the Poet

Ted Hughes was born in Yorkshire in 1930. His rural upbringing on the moors immensely influenced his poetry.

He met his future wife, the American poet Sylvia Plath, while at Cambridge University. He initially studied English, but later dropped this in favour of archaeology and anthropology. His first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was published in 1957. He and Plath had two children, but he left her in 1962 following her discovery of his affair. She committed suicide in 1963.

During the '60s, his reputation grew with a series of books for both children and adults, perhaps most notably *The Iron Man*². However, he was vilified by Plath's supporters for what they saw as his role in her death, and Hughes wrote some of his bitterest and most savage poetry in the 1970s.

In 1984, he was made Poet Laureate following John Betjeman's death, a post he held until his own death in 1998. Shortly before this, he had published his two most popular³ books, *Tales from Ovid* and *Birthday Letters*, a series of poems addressed to Plath.

The Title

'Wodwo' is the title poem of Hughes' first collection of 'adult' poetry since Plath's death, though it also contains stories and the transcript of a radio play written in the early '60s.

The title comes from the 14th Century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written in Middle English, the poem was Hughes' source of the word 'wodwos', the plural form. It occurs as well in Old English as 'wuduwosa'. The first element, 'wod' is our modern word 'wood'; the wuduwosa is a creature of the forest. The second element is more obscure, but may derive from the verb 'wesan' - 'to strive or contend'. And so, the wuduwosa would be an enemy in the forest. It is sometimes translated as 'faun' or 'satyr' because it was used by Old English scribes to gloss those words in Latin texts. The word was commonly used until the 16th Century to describe wild men of the forest, the figure that came to be called the 'Green Man' in the early 20th Century. In this passage (used by Hughes as an epitaph to 'Wodwo') it is translated as 'wild troll'.

He [Gawain] had death-struggles with dragons, did battle with wolves,

Warred with wild trolls that dwelt among the crags,

Battled with bulls and bears and boars at other times,

And ogres that panted after him on the high fells.

- 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'⁴

Hughes himself called a wodwo 'some sort of goblin creature'⁵.

This ambiguity surrounding the word is the basis of the poem. It begins 'What am I?' and the whole poem seems to be a riddle, an enigma. Much like those in the old Exeter Book of Riddles or in Chapter Five of *The Hobbit* by JRR Tolkien (who translated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and was an expert in Old and Middle English literature.)

Structure and Language

The poem is essentially a soliloquy in which the creature tries to ascertain what it is as it wanders through a forest.

It is written in 28 free-verse lines with a minimum of punctuation. Apart from one solitary comma in the first line and a full stop in line three, the only punctuation used is the question mark (and this sparingly). Phrases flow into phrases and several readings may be required to sort out the natural rhythm of the poem. The language is simple and conveys the basic questions that the wodwo is asking itself. For example:

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

It has the feeling of stream-of-consciousness, a technique used by novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf to convey the workings of the human mind - an internal monologue. The language successfully conveys the internal fight that the creature is having with itself. The jumble of words giving an indication of the rapidity with which it is thinking.

It ends with the words '...but I'll go on looking'. There is no full stop.

Interpretation

Wodwo is a puzzling poem and this is its point. The owner of this name is trying to understand what it is to the world. 'What am I?' it asks. 'Am I this, am I that?' This continual questioning of its place in the world is one of humanity's basic states. Is this what went through the mind of the first human to gain consciousness? The reader cannot help, because what it is has been lost to history. We can never know what the first human thought and we may never know exactly what the word 'wodwo' means.

One of the features of any successful poem is that it can make the reader question themselves. One of the strengths of 'Wodwo' is that these questions are already there for you and you can struggle with the wodwo as it struggles with its own mind. And the poem succeeds in conveying

the uncertainties of life in the modern world in this way: the wodwo's questions and troubled mind are our own. The last line says that the wodwo will 'go on looking'. It does not give up, and this belief has brought humanity to its current position

Summary

"Wodwo" by Ted Hughes is about a mythological "wood-man," or wild man, discovering his own nature as he explores the natural world. The wild-man is primal, with animal-like senses and instincts. He is found sniffing his way to the water's edge at the beginning of the poem: "What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over/Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge/I enter water." He then curiously investigates the reflection of the river bank in the water, wondering how it could be turned upside down. He discovers a frog in the water, and "inspects its most secret interior" (or dissects it). The primal man is obviously curious and intellectual, a scientist capable of wondering about his world. But his studies soon turn philosophical as he wonders at the nature of his own existence: "I can go anywhere/I seem to have been given the freedom/of this place what am I then?" The wild man has noted a difference between himself and all that he has been examining, noticing that he has a freedom the other elements of nature and animals do not seem to have because of the ecosystem they are so tightly knit to. He pauses for a moment to pick at some bark and wonders some more about his existence: about the implications of "doing," or his ability to exercise free will to take action. He wonders if he is the first of his kind and what his form looks like. He also wonders if he has an "owner," (a God or someone to give him purpose). He continues to explore the natural world, as through exploration he discovers more and more about the nature of his own existence. However, it is when he pauses to sit still that he notices he is the "centre" of everything, as if everything around is watching him. Thus, exploration and introspection teach the wild man he is simultaneously part of nature and an individual, separate consciousness.

Analysis of the poem

"Wodwo" is a poem of twenty-eight lines written in free verse. The poet is writing in the first person but in the persona of the Wodwo, which he describes in his essay "Learning to Think" (Poetry Is, 1970) as "some sort of goblin creature a sort of half-man half-animal spirit of the forests."

The Wodwo is not addressing the reader. Rather, the poem shows the stream of consciousness of the Wodwo. It mumbles to itself in the way that very young children or old people sometimes do, talking themselves through the processes of living and thinking. The poem begins with the Wodwo asking, "What am I?" The question is central to the poem and recurs in various modifications throughout. The reader sees the Wodwo rooting through leaves and following a scent to the river. It dives in, and one gains the first sense of how its exceptionally primitive consciousness experiences the world around it.

Wodwo is Hughes's 1967 collection of poetry, and draws its title from this poem. A "wodwo" is a

"wild man," a creature somewhere between elves and fairies and actual humans. One way to understand the wodwo is to think of it as a representation of primal masculinity, or "maleness" in a state before civilization. Hughes's poem is told from the point of view of a wodwo and is an effort to answer the question posed at the start: "What am I?"

Hughes's poem works on several levels. One of the most striking aspects of the poem is its evocation of the natural world. The wodwo's compulsive exploration of the natural world is described with potent sensory imagery: it is "nosing here, turning the leaves over, following a faint stain on the air"; this attention grants him knowledge of "the frog's most secret interior," but this causes him to wonder about his separateness from nature:

Do these weeds / know me and name me to each other have they / seen me before do I fit in their world?

This part of the poem seems to be to suggest that in posing the "What am I?" question, the wodwo already seems to have become self-conscious.

The poem then turns to considering the origin of the wodwo and the nature of freedom. When the wodwo notes that "I seem / separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped / out of nothing," he is articulating a basic paradox of existence: as a conscious being, he understands himself to be different from nature, but he cannot account for how this difference has happened. He seems to have been "dropped out of nothing"—there are "no threads / fastening me to anything I can go anywhere." In a way, it is this freedom that comes to define the wodwo; he finds that "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," as if his "shape" can be measured not by physical size but the degree to which he can move or shape the natural world. It is as if his growing consciousness of himself has become an organizing principle for all existence: "for the moment if I / sit still how everything / stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre."

It's hard not to read this poem—the centerpiece of Hughes's first collection after the death of his wife, Sylvia Plath—as a kind of response to the feminine energy in her posthumous collection *Ariel*, the publication of which was overseen by Hughes. The wodwo's supposition that he is the focus of attention while also helpless before his instinctive need to explore the natural world also sums up a particular view of masculinity: one that is supremely self-conscious and ego-driven, while at the same time, spurred on by unconscious desires. This poem, then, is perhaps less of a declaration of what it is to be "male," than a description of the poet's internal state.

Themes

This poem is a stream of consciousness poem, so it appears to be all over the place. That can throw off some readers and cause knee jerk reactions that believe the poem doesn't have anything useful to say or have anything of thematic importance. That would be a huge oversight to think like that with this poem.

At the core of this poem is a search. The speaker of the poem lets readers know from the very first line that he is searching for what he is. As the poem continues, it should become clear to readers that the speaker is also searching for his place in the world. Man's place in the world is a powerful and long lasting theme. It has been thematically discussed across centuries of literature, and different literary movements are continually moving man's importance around. This poem is a bit unique because at times, it puts the speaker on par with various parts of nature; however, in other places the poet announces that he is "the exact centre."

Another theme present in the poem is a theme of individuality. This can be seen in the number of times that the poet uses the word "I." It appears nearly two dozen times throughout the poem, and it shows readers that the poem's speaker is very much reflecting internally on himself. The poem also conveys a message that the speaker thinks very highly of himself at times. He is free to do whatever he wants whenever he wants.

I've no threads

fastening me to anything I can go anywhere

I seem to have been given the freedom

of this place

Finally, I think a third central theme is a theme of perseverance. The poem is all about the speaker searching for his place in the world and trying to discover what he is. For every possible answer that he receives, it is almost always met with another question, yet that is important. Getting an answer only to be met with another question can be incredibly frustrating, but he doesn't give up. He keeps searching, and the poem ends without the speaker having a definitive answer. That doesn't bother him, because he says that he'll keep searching. It's a very hopeful ending.