

“Poetry Analysis Ted Hughes’ “The Howling of Wolves”

Like the poem “The Song of a Rat,” the animal in Ted Hughes’ “The Howling of Wolves” is portrayed as a victim. They are victims of their own predatory nature, that has made them live like this according their wildest whims and inherent instincts. This impulse in them inexorably stresses on the theory of survival of the fittest without any qualms. They are therefore “without world” because their only consideration is their inner world. They assert themselves “on their long leashes of sound” that dissolve in mid-air silence. They make their presence felt through the silence of the nights. They have indeed a very keen sense of perception that is put on alert with the crying of a baby). This innocent instinctive cry of the baby is contrasted against the wild howlings.

They also detect very easily the tuning of a violin with their alert ears. The gentle sound is as fragile as an owl’s ear. The poet connotes more than he denotes here as an Owl’s range of audible sounds is different from most of the living beings. Its hearing ability is much more acute at certain frequencies that renders audible the slightest movement of their prey in leaves or undergrowth.

The howling of the wolves that is likened to “long leashes of sound” reminds one of the “poetic effacy of shrieks “ in “Burning the Letters’. The phrase “furred steel” is an oxymoron. The steel traps clashing and slavering refers to the jaws that are ironically referred to as “innocent”. Their instinct with an iron nerve makes them reach all the answers and their meant preys.

But what the Wolf cannot fathom is how they came to be like this. All they know is that they must live, and this transforms into their guiding motto. That their actions arise out of instinct, and are not calculated as with human beings. This is why the poet uses the words :

“Innocence crept into minerals.”

The poet then shifts focus from the community of wolves to a single wolf in keeping with the theme of the poem. For what finally matters for the wolf is that it lives for itself. The wind

sweeps through the hunched wolf ;and it shivers in a way as ambiguous as its existence; for one cannot decipher whether the quivering is out of joy or agony.

The line:”The earth is under its tongue” gives only secondary importance to the earth-the physical world. It states that the self(Wolf) takes the precedence, and the first preference. The wolf ,in reality, according to the poet lives for the sake of earth, as all the beings do as they define the earth. Yet, it is small in stature and in its rationalizing capabilities to comprehend the same. It is “A dead weight of darkness, trying to see through its eyes.” It goes along just as times does “to and fro”. It moves with the inevitability of a pendulum “trailing its haunches and whimpering horribly”. Providing a magnificent background to the majesty of the animal is the night snowing stars, and the earth creaking with the echoes of its howls. Hughes metaphor of the wolf is utilized to emblemize our innate instinct that dominates us at times, as we transcend into primitivism with animal-like passion. Ann Skea tells us: “Of all the symbols which Hughes uses, the wolf is almost unique in the lasting power of its attraction for him, in the ambiguity of its nature as he describes it, and in the way in which he extends the scope of its symbolism from personal to universal applicability. Hughes’s wolves embody the contradictory qualities of the natural energies: they have beauty of form, an economical directness of function, the instinctive voracity of appetite for which wolves are renowned, and a predatory cunning which has allowed them to survive in the harshest of environments. It is no surprise, therefore, that Hughes’s latest book of poetry should be called *Wolfwatching*.”

The wolf thus becomes a mask that at times is just a mask ,and at times becomes the man itself merging with the man and dominating him completely. As Hughes wrote the poem just after the death of Sylvia Plath (1963),one wonders whether he was preoccupied with her death as she was a victim too of her own instinctive whims and fancies. A victim of her own creativity that said : “Dying is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well. I do it so it feels like hell. I do it so it feels real. I guess you could say I’ve a call.”