

TED HUGHES' *THE IRON MAN*: A REDEMPTIVE STORY

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Abstract:

During five successive nights Ted Hughes composed instalments of a story for his own children and the imaginative story became The Iron Man. The story possesses some key features that will appeal to all young readers: a fascinations with machines, with space, with the direct challenge to trial of strength. This paper discusses the contemporary relevance of this story; where there the Iron Man represents a problem that cannot be buried – the most satisfactory solution is a recycling of the by-products of the machine age. Hughes suggests an accommodated relationship of the machine age with nature that does not challenge or seek to diminish, its wild strangeness. Besides this paper interprets this story (from Jungian perspective) as one of the medium in Hughes' life to heal his fractured' self or to redeem himself. He creates a myth of Iron Man where the children of the poet imaginatively can identify the Giant with their own father. On the symbolic level the Iron Man is the poet himself.

Keywords: Myth, Redemption, Machine Age, Imaginative Story.

Ted Hughes wrote more books for children than collections of original poetry for adults. The role of this writing in his literary life for adults is complex and various. There was certainly a financial incentive. He wrote to his brother in 1957 that “we should all earn our fortunes on it” (Middlebrook 97) and at least in the 1960s he not only published more books for children than for adults, but the children's books had longer print runs. But it was by no means a cynical venture. Writing for children and the related activity of encouraging writing by children were central to what might be called his ideological project. He wrote in his essay (1976 version) “Myth and Education” that “Every new child is nature's chance to correct culture's error”(149). Both the seriousness and the delight of writing for children are

beautifully manifest in his highly praised book *The Iron Man: A Children's Story in Five Nights*, written as a bedtime story for his own children.

Lissa Paul in her article 'A Second Look: The Return of the Iron Man'(2008) highlights on the various aspects of the story and interprets it as a moral parable, a little fable, in the tradition of tales told by Sufi poets and bards from the Heroic age. *The Iron Man* was first published by Faber & Faber in 1968 and later in 1985 Andrew Davidson gave illustrations to this book. After the death of Ted Hughes in 1998, the book had been considered as one of the great classics of British Children's Literature, the book is still now heavily read and acclaimed. In America the book was published under the title *The Iron Giant* in order to avoid the confusion with Marvel Comics' character Iron Man¹. In 1989 Pete Townshend released a musical rock adaptation: *The Iron Man: A Musical*, though the review was negative. The book was adapted in a film version under the title of *The Iron Giant* in 1999 directed by Brad Bird, released as a major 'motion picture' by Warner Brothers.

In this essay I shall discuss one of the devices Hughes uses in *The Iron Man* to revitalize the human spirit directly connected to his own being. Though he has asserted that the human being is not central (we live in a bio-centric world, rather than in an anthropocentric world) in the universe, it is to this human being that Hughes's work is necessarily directed. To get humanity back in touch with the world, Hughes harkens back to the archetypal images and myths which are buried deep in the racial unconscious of the human mind. He attempts to evoke the necessary "powers of the psyche to be recognized and integrated in our lives, powers that have been common to the human spirit forever, and which represent that wisdom of the species by which man has weathered the millenniums" (Campbell 13). One of Hughes's methods is the visionary story. It is "the visionary story which Hughes sees both at the root of imaginative literature, and at the root of his own poetry, prose, and drama....fusing mythic stories with contemporary colloquial language" (Bubbers 3134-A). Hughes's book *The Iron Man* is a telling example of his ability to tell visionary stories. Hughes mentions the moral significance of his story and expresses the concept that some kinds of imaginative stories can have a curative effect. The concerned text can be interpreted on a more personal level- as a healing allegory, a story of redemption of a fractured self: that of Hughes. In 1968 when the book was new, Hughes' children Frieda and Nicholas by his wife Plath and Shura by his partner Assia were too young. Their names initially all were mentioned in the dedication page. Their names tell Hughes' tragic stories and his stories of survival. But in 1963 Sylvia Plath, his wife, committed suicide. Later (just one year after the publication of the book) he had to witness the deaths of Assia Wevill who gassed herself and her daughter Shura. All these tragic stories² are the part of the story of *The Iron Man*. This visionary story (partly a modern fairy tale and partly science fiction) was written against the serious context of Hughes' mental trauma of losing dear ones of his life.

It is a story of the mysterious arrival of an iron giant in a rural community. The giant eats metal and the initial response of the community is to destroy him. They catch him in an enormous elephant trap and bury him. He re-emerges by the help of the hero of the story, a boy called Hogarth³, befriends him and later arranges for him to be fed in a scrap-yard. In the next section the theme of the story is repeated on a global scale. The earth is threatened by a 'space-bat-angel-dragon'. Again humanity attempts to destroy the threat and again it fails. Hogarth asks the Iron Man to help, which he does by challenging the dragon to a trial by extreme heat. The Iron Man wins and the dragon returns to outer space where it makes the music of the spheres. The book is divided into five chapters – "The Coming of the Iron Man", "The Return of the Iron Man", "What's to Be Done to the Iron Man?", "The Space-Being and the Iron Man" and "The Iron Man's Challenge". Hughes discusses the story at length in the first version of his essay 'Myth and Education', which is very different from the version published in *Winter Pollen*. He describes it as a conscious attempt to counter the psychological influence of stories such as St George and the Dragon⁴, in which the monster is destroyed. *The Iron Man* offers an alternative to ruthless cruelty. Mankind tries to destroy the space-dragon. Hughes explains the reason:

They want to bring the whole world back to the status quo of no space monsters, no intrusion from the unknown. They want the whole world to be settled back to its worldly affairs and to be able to ignore the terrible energies of space. (*Myth and Education*: 1970, p.65)

He also emphasises the story's contemporary relevance to the collision with the American technological world and beyond that, the opening up of a universe which was completely uninhabited except by atoms and the energy of atoms. He personifies the rise the contemporary environmental conflict between the age of machines and technology and the destruction of the environment, through human-inflicted changes to nature. According to Hughes,

Now if I were some poet of the heroic age I could claim for my story that it would, first of all, connect you back to your struggle with ordinary existence and society and outer life, and that beyond that, it would connect you with the deepest and most alien seeming powers in your own mind, which are the correspondents of the outermost demon powers of space...I could then claim that my story would cure schizophrenia...One doesn't make these claims, of course. (*Ibid.* 66-67)

Hughes could rightly claim, however, that he had created an original myth that is also

distinctively contemporary. As he put it in a discussion after a reading of 'Myth and Education', 'you only invent the myths you need.' (*Ibid.* 68)

The Iron Man depicts an almost indestructible machine-like monster who at first harasses mankind by consuming their cars, tractors, telephone wires— anything containing iron or metal— but who ends up offering himself as a sacrifice (to get rid of a greater nuisance— a fire-breathing space dragon) as a redeemer, restoring life to earth. The Iron Man is a version of the archetypal heroic figure which proliferates folktales and ancient myths. Living at the bottom of the sea and emerging only from time to time, the Iron Man is an element inhabiting the universal pool of unconscious, typified in Jungian imagery as a huge body of water. That which abides in the water is collective. "Access to the collective psyche means a renewal of life for the individual" (Jung 118). Hughes makes use of this archetypal pattern— the pool of unconsciousness and the heroic figure— to arrest the reader's attention and to provide the reader with an ancient universal remedy to restore vitality of spirit and of mind. The Iron Man is an evocation of the archetypal image necessary to call into motion the elemental and universal powers associated with it. Hughes's concept for healing is actually a Jungian one:

Since neuroses are in most cases not just private concerns, but social phenomena, we must assume that archetypes are constellated in these cases too. The archetype corresponding to the situation is activated, and as a result those explosive and dangerous forces hidden in the archetype come into action. (Jung 66).

The final chapter in *The Iron Man*, "The Iron Man's Challenge," is the one most interesting to this brief study. The Iron Man challenges the "space-bat-angel-dragon" to a test of strength: an iron pyre was built which the Iron Man lay on, a fire raging beneath. After he turned red and almost molten with heat, the fire died and it became the "space-bat-angel-dragon's" turn. He, however, was told to lie on the sun as no pyre could be built for him — he was too huge. This challenge was repeated a second time:

At last, the Iron Man looked up at the dragon. He could hardly speak after his ordeal in the flames. Instead, he simply pointed towards the sun, and jabbed his finger towards the sun, as he gazed up at the monster. "That's twice," he managed to say. "Now it's your turn" (*The Iron Man*, 54). The space dragon did return after his second trial on the sun, but he was changed: The fires of the sun had worked on him in a way that was awful to see. His wings were only rags of what they had been. His skin was crisped. And all his fatness had been changed by the fires of the sun into precious stones— jewels,

emeralds, rubies, turquoises, and substances that had never been found on earth. (*Ibid.* 55).

When the Iron Man challenged the "space-bat-angel-dragon" to a third round, the space monster had to submit. Instead of destroying the creature, though, the creature was integrated into society— it was asked to teach the earth inhabitants the song of space, the music of the spheres. The plot of the story seems to issue directly from Jung's writings:

It is precisely the strongest and best among men, the heroes, who give way to their regressive longing and purposely expose themselves to the danger of being devoured by the monster of the maternal abyss. But if a man is a hero, he is a hero because in the final reckoning, he did not let the monster devour him, but subdued it. not once but many times (Jung 119).

Whether the space-monster actually represents the maternal abyss is unimportant to the story. Its name, the "space-bat-angel- dragon," is unusual, basically because of the third element in its name— angel. The creature has not only elements of mystery (space), night (bat), and terror (dragon), but integrates an element of transcendent goodness. When burnt in the sun's fires, the dragon's fat alchemized into precious jewels. That which was at first feared— because of the direct action taken by the heroic Iron Man— becomes honoured and beautified. Also it is discovered that the dragon has a wonderful gift, the gift of music— a music not found on earth, the known, but arising from mystery, the unknown:

The soft eerie space-music began to alter all the people of the world....All they wanted to do was to have peace to enjoy this strange, wild, blissful music from the giant singer in space (*The Iron Man*, 58-59).

Hughes shows us that beautiful gifts can come from the unknown when it is not hidden but is confronted and grasped through strength and compassion. The violence of the fires, the tribulations which ensued before the unknown could be mastered and approached, became a violence necessary to release feelings of compassion— compassion for one's own self and compassion for the world. The tribulations undertaken by the Iron Man, his mastery over fear, culminate in the ultimate sacrifice of himself for humanity's sake. By confronting danger head on, the Iron Man's victory allows humanity to coexist with the unknown and mysterious powers the space-dragon represents.

The Iron Man shows us that happiness can be attained by relinquishing fear and subservience to the petty self. This story is an allegorical recipe for the proper methods to be taken in order to celebrate life. Within the story we encounter primordial images— the heroic

figure, rebirth through strife, reconciliation with the part-animal part-divine figure represented by the space-dragon. According to Jung,

Primordial images and patterns are older than the historical man...inborn in him from the earliest times, and eternally living, outlasting all generations, [which] still make up the groundwork of the human psyche," (Jung 21).

Hughes asserts with Jung through this story and many other prose writings, poems and tales that "It is only possible to live the fullest life when we are in harmony with these symbols; wisdom is a return to them" (Jung 21). The Iron Man, as Hughes explains in an essay titled "The Interpretation of Parables" (*Times Educational Supplement*, 1992) is a giant of the technological world and dragon as a monster from the depths of living matter. Hogarth takes these highly potential threatening monsters and turns their powers to good. Hughes wanted to leave a moral message to his readers and children; and the message is to integrate potential threats imaginatively in much the same way as Jung argues for the creative integration of the shadow side of the self. Behind creating such an imaginatively powerful story, Hughes had a reason, as various editions of the story offer, to heal a shuttered and fractured self.

The story also tells a tale of friendship, betrayal and reconciliation between Hogarth, the little boy and the Iron Man, as Kerslake points out. First with the help of Hogarth the farmers dig a giant trap, then capture him and bury him. But the Iron Man has a sort of magical power by which he can rise again by reassembling himself. After reconciling Hogarth decides to help the Iron Man (metal man) by leading him to the scrap yard where he can survive with the food of the mountains of old machines and cars instead the tractors belonging to the farmers. After the people of the world announces the war against 'Space-Bat-Angel-Dragon', the Iron Man competes with the dragon in order to defend the world. Much expectedly the Iron Man wins. In the film by the director Brad Bird the line of conflict between the natural and the artificial are clearly drawn. The film version adds the character of Mansley as the embodiment of the artificial. In the climax Mansley decides to launch missile to destroy the Giant. But the Giant just like a superman catches the missile and is blown to pieces to save the mankind. The Iron Giant (American) like the Iron Man is able to heal himself, to put himself together and brings an end to all conflicts and wars all over the globe with a note of reconciliation and restoration. At the end culture and nature are in harmony.

So *The Iron Man* is a redemptive story not only on the personal level, as it is interlinked with the 'fractured self' of the poet who badly needed fresh oxygen from imaginative stories like this; on the global (universal) level it is a redemptive story of the whole mankind as at the end the 'nature' is restored to peace.

Notes

- ¹ The American edition of *The Iron Man* was first published under the title of *The Iron Giant* in 1968 by Harper & Row with illustrations by Robert Nadler. But the book in America failed to gather good reviews.
- ² For more information see chapter eleven and twelve of Feinstein's book.
- ³ The name of the boy is probably a tribute an artist William Hogarth whose engravings of 'moral subjects' rejuvenated English art.
- ⁴ "Several of Hughes' works, especially those for children, are remaking of that 'suspect' legend of St George and Dragon. ...The St George story simply advocates 'the complete suppression of terror'" (Sagar 230).

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