

The Concept of Violence in Modern English Poetry: A Study of Selected Poems by Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas, and Ted Hughes

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the concept of violence, thematically and technically, in the poetry of Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Dylan Thomas (1914-1953), and Ted Hughes (1930-1998). It shows that the obsession of modern poets with the concept of violence was a natural outcome of the Victorian crisis of faith; a crisis which was instigated not only by the industrial and scientific revolutionary spirit of the age, but also by the social, political, and materialistic theories. This all led to the devastation of moral and religious values, which, in turn, caused the outburst of violence in the modern world, and forced new elements into the poetry of the period.

As it is hazardous to attempt to trace retrospectively the upsurging amount of violence in the modern world without reconsidering the significant changes which erupted during the closing years of the late Victorian era, the paper sheds light on some of the poetry of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), as two prominent poets of the period who employed such elements of violence in their writings. The paper shows that their revolutionary poetry, and more particularly its stylistic and thematic violence and intensity, is not only carried on by the modern poets, but also revealed in signs of regeneration and diversity, thematically and technically.

The paper argues that though violence reaches its peak at the outset of the First and Second World Wars, the chosen poets endeavor to employ it for positive ends. The paper first examines the violence of the First World War by exploring the physical and psychological violations of the war poetry of Wilfred Owen, which reveals his truthful account of the bestiality and devastation of that War; an account that abandons the romantic and idealistic view of the pre-war time. It demonstrates some aspects of the intolerable violence of war not only in the physical aspects, in terms of deaths and bodily mutilations, but also in the psychological ones, in terms of neurotic cracks, weariness, hallucination, madness, and other disabled psychological symptoms which appeared in the mentally stable soldiers. The poetry of Owen reflects the impact of violence on the indelible physical and psychological wounds of the young soldiers, and, hence, warn the reader of the dangers of war. Second, it shows that the concept of violence in the poetry of Dylan Thomas is a style or, more particularly, a linguistic weapon that he uses to release his agony against the cosmic realities of existence, and its inevitable cycle of birth, copulation and death. Through the vibrancy, intensity, and violence of his poetic language, Thomas urges his reader to violently rebel against this cycle, and, thus, escape the existential agony. Third, it shows that Ted Hughes offers a wider conception of violence, where his poetry distinguishes two types, negative and positive. Whereas Hughes echoes the first with the violence of the over-civilized man, he equates the second with the violence of the natural world. The first is immoral, demonic, dark, and destructive, but the second is natural, instinctive, and irrational. Whereas the first involves the idea of violation or blasphemy, the second is biological and leads to progress. To create awareness in man of the magnitude of violence in nature, Hughes exposes the “raw energy” underlying violence, which he equates with what he calls “vehement activity” or with the release of global energy in the natural course of animal life or the elemental world of nature. It is an affirmation of life and all the forces that govern the universe, from which modern man has

alienated himself. As a shamanic twentieth century poet, Hughes strives to revitalize the link between mankind and nature.

Finally, the paper seeks to prove that the concept of violence, in modern English poetry, is a multi-dimensional one. It takes different shapes and serves a variety of dissimilar purposes. Whereas poets, such as Owen and Hughes, expose its ugly, germ, and demonic face, others, such as Thomas and Hughes, use it to shock the reader, and then revitalize him, to awake him into a new awareness, or to activate him, and drag him out of his stagnation or his spiritual death.

Key Words: Violence, Victorian Poetry, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Modern English Poetry, War Poetry, Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes