

The Oedipus Myth in Ted Hughes's *Crow*

By Sophie Pollard

Crow: from the life and songs of the Crow (1972) is Ted Hughes's epic myth poem, which began as a series of poems to accompany Leonard Baskin's anthropomorphic etchings of Crows. Originally intended as children's literature, the collection soon developed into a wider exploration of the human psyche that encompasses themes of birth, death and rebirth. These themes are manifested in several poems from the collection such as 'Song for a Phallus', 'Oedipus Crow', 'Crow and Mama' and 'Crow Sickened' which borrow from, and refer to Seneca's depiction of Oedipus.

Hughes was familiar with the Oedipus myth; in 1968, two years after he began to write the *Crow* poems, he adapted a version of Seneca's Oedipus for the stage. Under the direction of Peter Brook, the idea was to release the power of the narrative in its 'plainest, bluntest form'.¹ Hughes says that the moral world that Sophocles created is not present within the text, and he suggests that Seneca's imagination quietly produces 'something else – a series of epic descriptions that contain the raw dream of Oedipus, the basic, poetic, mythical substance of the fable' (*Seneca's Oedipus*, p. 8). It is the thematic structure of the 'raw dream' that this essay will identify in *Crow*. By critically analysing 'Song for a Phallus',² this essay will identify Hughes's playful intertextual usage of the Oedipus myth, and argue that the complex figure of Crow encompasses qualities of Oedipus, man and writer.

The title of 'Song for a Phallus' nods to Freud, by referring to the 'Phallic stage' of psychosexual development which Freud borrowed from the Oedipus myth itself.³

¹ Ted Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus, adapted by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 8. Further references to this book are given as *Seneca's Oedipus* in the text.

² Ted Hughes, 'Song for a Phallus', *Crow: from the life and songs of the Crow*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 69

³ 'You all know the Greek legend of King Oedipus, who was destined by fate to kill his father and take his mother to wife, who did everything possible to escape the oracle's decree and punished himself by blinding when he learned that he had none the less unwittingly committed both these crimes' Sigmund Freud, *The Standard*

The title cleverly identifies Freud's role in the modern understanding of the Oedipus myth, but it is mocking in tone which sets the mood for the rest of the poem. The title also indicates the form that the poem will take as a 'Song', and it follows the conventions of the Ballad in terms of its metre.⁴ 'Song for a Phallus' is one of the metrical poems within *Crow*, as Hughes doesn't always conform to traditional poetic forms throughout the collection. Hughes says that,

The very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past and it is difficult to sing one's own tune against that choir. It is easier to speak a language that raises no ghosts.⁵

It could be argued that through 'Song for a Phallus' Hughes uses the traditional balladic metre to 'call up' the ghost of Oedipus. However, this doesn't mean that he will simply recreate the Oedipus myth verbatim from Sophocles, Seneca or Freud despite his borrowing from each. Hughes outlines his intentions when creating *Crow* in an interview with Keith Sagar as:

My main concern was to produce something with the minimum cultural accretions of the museum sort – something autochthonous and complete in itself, as it might be invented after the holocaust and demolition of all the libraries, where essential things spring again.⁶

As 'Song for a Phallus' is a satire of the Oedipus myth, Dennis Walder disagrees with Hughes that he can totally divorce himself from a cultural context which is dependent on 'something [which] *is* still held sacred, in which the myths, ritual and religions of the past are not entirely forgotten and unfamiliar'.⁷ Admittedly

Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953), p. 74

⁴ David Mikics defines the 'Ballad stanza' as: 'a four-line stanza that rhymes the second and fourth lines, but not the first and third. The first and third lines have four beats, the second and fourth lines, three beats.' Quoted from *A new handbook of literary terms* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 33

⁵ Ted Hughes quoted in Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 208

⁶ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, 2nd edn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 107

⁷ Dennis Walder, *Ted Hughes*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987), p. 69

Hughes's desire to create a post-Holocaust landscape within *Crow* is not totally autochthonous as 'Song for a Phallus' sees a construct of cultural references about the Oedipus myth recorded as song legend. The significance of this being that, as Hughes states, this collection could have been invented after the demolition of all the libraries, the oral tradition of storytelling would recreate past narratives. As a ballad 'Song for a Phallus' would form a part of this recreation through the oral tradition.

The literary style of *Crow* is very distinctive, and in an interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes reveals his stylistic decisions when writing *Crow*:

The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words songs with no music whatsoever, in a super simple and a super ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing. (Faas, p. 208)

The 'super ugly' and 'super simple' language that Hughes creates is evident within 'Song for a Phallus'. The language within the poem is both simplistic and colloquial as is evident in lexis such as 'fella', 'belly', 'brat', 'Mammy' and 'turd' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 69). Punctuation is sparse throughout 'Song for a Phallus', as it also is within Hughes's version of Seneca's Oedipus, which creates a fast pace with run on sentences drawing the reader through the sixteen quatrains. Hughes maintains a rapid, jovial pace throughout the poem through the use of alternative rhyming couplets such as, 'Dickybird/Turd' and 'out/shout' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 69). Paul Bentley believes that Hughes's 'super simple' language and imagery represent a type of regression.⁸

Whilst narrated in the third person, the simple language mimics a nursery rhyme, which is appropriate to Oedipus, who we learn has just been born. The character of 'Dickybird' is a comical bird from nursery rhymes, but appears in 'Song for a Phallus' as the character who delivers the prophecy to Daddy. By placing King Laius and Jocasta as Mammy and Daddy, albeit in a sarcastic adaptation of the

⁸ Bentley goes on to discuss that this regression can be theoretically mapped to the Lacanian 'mirror stage' of childhood development. Paul Bentley, 'Depression and Ted Hughes's *Crow*, or through the looking glass and what *Crow* found there', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43:1, (1997), 22–40 (p. 28)

oedipal concept, he reinforces the infantile relationship of Oedipus to the other characters in the poem. Hughes identifies that the difficulty of recreating an archaic legend with a sustained simplicity 'is the business of reaching the right kind of simplicity – and then hanging onto it'.⁹ Hughes maintains his simple use of language, punctuation and form throughout 'Song for a Phallus' to great effect. The overall pace, when coupled with the simple poetic devices, is effective when building dramatic tension. The line 'O do not chop his winkle off/His Mammy cried with horror' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 69) juxtaposes humorous language with a violent attempt at castration that creates a shocking, yet farcical drama within the poem. There is another attempt to castrate Oedipus when Dickybird appears again and threatens Oedipus that the 'Sphinx will bite your bollocks off' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 69).

Daddy's desire to castrate Oedipus is spiritually driven, because he has had 'the word from God' and Dickybird later informs Oedipus that 'this order comes from God' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 69). The mention of God within 'Song for a Phallus' is a double reference to the Gods that Oedipus has angered in Seneca's Oedipus and also the God that appears throughout *Crow*, yet Oedipus manages to escape castration.

These threats of castration mockingly refer to Freud's work on the 'dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' that centers on the transition from the oedipal complex into the latency period. For males this includes the recognition of sexual difference from females who are without penises, which is interpreted into an anxiety that they will be castrated as they believe females have been.

The relationship between Oedipus and *Crow* is a complex one as the bird is aligned with man. Hughes states that the *Crow* is 'the most intelligent of all birds'¹⁰ and 'maybe [Crow's] ambition is to become a man' (Hughes, quoted by Ann Skea). This ambition is relevant to a reading of 'Song for a Phallus' as it is

⁹ Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* ed. by William Scammell (London : Faber, 1994), p. 242

¹⁰ Ted Hughes, quoted on Ann Skea's website, Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes and Crow', <http://ann.skea.com/Trickstr.htm>, 1998, 26/04/09

manifested in several ways. At the Adelaide Festival, Hughes described *Crow's* encounter with the Oedipus myth:

[...] early on, he encounters the literature of Oedipus, since he's so involved with his own search, and he reads Sophocles, and he reads Seneca, and he reads Freud. [...] He produces plays and stories but he can never get more than two characters into the plays and stories – always the same two characters. So when he comes to deal with the Oedipus theme, he's stuck again with these two characters. This is a song from one of his plays – presumably the play is mimed while somebody sings the song – and, as a matter of fact, he steals the entire thing from Seneca.¹¹

Hughes goes on to say that the literature the *Crow* produces is very crude, and the two characters that *Crow* is stuck with are that of man and woman. Hughes's initial intention when writing *Crow* was to provide a voice for *Crow* through song. Yet interestingly, Hughes explores and develops *Crow's* voice in different ways. Hughes moves from his original intention of writing songs that he imagined a *Crow* would sing, to anthropomorphising *Crow* who has the ability to write 'Song for a Phallus' himself. Paul Bentley believes that Hughes uses *Crow* as a device for testing out our narratives (such as the Oedipus narrative) that have already been written and that 'Crow does not so much reproduce meaning as reaccentuate it, blackly'.¹² By making *Crow* a writer Hughes suggests *Crow* has a sophisticated intelligence that demonstrates both literacy and creativity. This transforms *Crow* into a quasi-human figure as reading and writing are human activities. Yet, considering the crude and simplistic nature of *Crow's* use of language, it appears as a childlike intelligence akin to the type the Hughes defines in 'Myth and Education'.

A child takes possession of a story as what might be called a unit of imagination. [...] The child can re-enter the story at will, look around him, find all those things and consider them at his leisure. In attending to the

¹¹ Ted Hughes quoted from Anna Skea, 'Ted Hughes at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week', March 1976, a transcription of Ted Hughes's own commentary on the poems listed below, including part of the *Crow* story, transcribed by Ann Skea, <http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Adelaide.htm>, 26/04/09

¹² Paul Bentley, 'Depression and Ted Hughes's *Crow*, or through the looking glass and what *Crow* found there', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43:1, (1997), 22–40 (p. 28)

world of such a story there is the beginning of imaginative and mental control. (Winter Pollen, p. 139)

From this point of view, *Crow* demonstrates a juvenile intellect as he takes possession of the Oedipus myth in its various forms and transforms that which he has read to create something of his own interpretation. In 'Myth and Education' Hughes goes on to say that if a story is learned well 'all its parts can be seen at a glance' which allows the story to 'become like the hinterland of a single word' (*Winter Pollen*, p. 139). The single word he chooses in this context is that of Christ, but the same is true of the word Oedipus in *Song for a Phallus*. Despite which version of the myth you have encountered, the general narrative structure of Oedipus unwittingly killing his father, and marrying his mother remains the same whilst the execution may differ as we see from the comparison between Hughes's Seneca, Sophocles and *Crow's* Oedipus.

In addition, Hughes mentions *Crow's* 'own search' which suggests he is motivated by an existential crisis and does not really understand who he is, or why he is alive. Whilst there are varying opinions about the autobiographical references in *Crow*, there are similarities between *Crow* the writer and Hughes as he is projecting his experience of adapting Seneca's Oedipus onto *Crow*. It has been well documented that the 'darkness' of *Crow* is a response to crises occurring in Hughes's personal life at the time of writing, and critic Felicity Rosslyn suggests that rather than place himself at the centre of the text, 'It was easier to employ *Crow's* ugly claw, than to find a human voice to own its fears and aggressions'.¹³ However, aligning *Crow* with Hughes and Oedipus *Crow* with man is not quite fitting with Hughes's mythology. Hughes stated that the intention of the God figure within *Crow* was to create a being that was 'something better than Man'.¹⁴ He describes a *Crow* as 'the indestructible bird who suffers everything, suffers nothing'. Yet, Oedipus as human is not indestructible and suffers from physical afflictions that outwardly symbolise his weaknesses. In 'Crow and Mama' *Crow* suffers similar

¹³ Felicity Rosslyn, 'That Fox Again', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 30:1, (2001), 91–96, (p. 95)

¹⁴ Ted Hughes, quoted on Ann Skea's website, Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow*', <http://ann.skea.com/Trickstr.htm>, 1998, 26/04/09

afflictions such as blindness ('he could not see much'),¹⁵ and in 'Oedipus Crow' he is seen dangling 'from his one claw'.¹⁶ This could also be read as a playful reference to the common depiction of the fool in tarot who often hangs head down from one foot. Whilst Hughes reminds us that Crow is not a man by referring to his 'claw', he clearly suggests that Crow is suffering from the same fallibilities as Oedipus. Crow is not physically indestructible and clearly suffers as a result of his flaw which, like Oedipus, is one of pride. Like Oedipus he becomes lamed by his swollen ego. Hirschberg believes that in 'Song for a Phallus' Crow is avoiding acknowledging of himself by mimicking Oedipus's blinding of himself,

Oedipus raised his axe again
The World is dark, he cried

The World is dark one inch ahead
What's on the other side? ('Song for a Phallus', p. 71)

In Hughes's adaptation of Seneca, the darkness that descends on Oedipus is treated similarly,

the terrors of the light are now finished for Oedipus
he lifted his face with its raw horrible gaps
he tested the darkness (Hughes, Seneca's Oedipus, p. 51)

Whereas Seneca's Oedipus blinds himself because he believes that offering his eyes to the god will end his suffering, Hughes's Oedipus does not appear to offer his eyes as a gift but his blindness appears accidental. His question 'What's on the other side?' suggests he has a strong desire to continue to escape despite his physical affliction.

Crow's desire to 'escape' takes two forms within the poem; the desire to escape destiny, and the desire to escape the womb. Hughes read 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' which teaches how to close the womb door to avoid reincarnation and birth into the world of desires. In 'Song for a Phallus' the exit from the womb is a struggle for Crow, as he is 'Stuck in his Mammy's belly' which is because 'His

¹⁵ Ted Hughes, 'Crow and Mama', *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 5.

¹⁶ Ted Hughes, 'Oedipus Crow', *Crow: from the life and songs of the Crow*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 35

Daddy'd walled the exit up' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 69). Daddy's desire to 'wall up' the womb is for selfish purposes, as to prevent Oedipus's birth is also an attempt to stop Oedipus from allowing Dickybird's prophecy to come true. Unfortunately for Daddy, birth (like death) cannot be prevented and in the following stanza Crow busts out of his swollen mother 'with a bang' as he is born. Sagar believes that Crow is desperate to escape the womb because 'Crow's attachment to self is so total that he strives to open the womb door through which he can enter the blackness, the blindness of physical vision' (Keith Sagar, p. 110). His desire to enter the blackness is evident in these lines from 'Crow and Mama' when we read Crow's wonderment as he escapes the womb,

But he peered out of the portholes of Creation
And saw the stars millions of miles away
And saw the future and the universe
Opening and opening [...]
Crashed on the moon and awoke and crawled out
Under his mother's buttocks. ('Crow and Mama', p. 5)

Shortly after Oedipus's birth in 'Song for a Phallus', he fulfills part of the prophecy as his father attempts to throw him to the cat:

[...] For when he hit the ground
He bounced up like a jackinabox [...]

He hit his Daddy with such a whack
Stone dead his daddy fell. ('Song for a Phallus', p. 70)

As Oedipus bounces off the ground, he seems indestructible at this stage in the poem. There is a sense of irony as that Daddy's death comes after his failed attempt to kill his son and these lines encapsulates the inability of Oedipus and his father and mother from escaping their fate.

All of the Oedipus poems within *Crow* involve a struggle to escape the womb and as a consequence, the mother. There are two female characters within 'Song for a Phallus' that Oedipus wishes to escape from, Mammy and the Sphinx. The figure

of the Sphinx is a monster from Greek mythology that resembled a lion with wings and the face and breast of a female. She would pose a riddle to all that passed, and would kill those who were unable to solve it. Hirschberg states that in Sophocles's version 'Oedipus answers her riddle and the Sphinx kills herself'¹⁷ and the same also occurs in Hughes's version of Seneca. However, in 'Song for a Phallus' Oedipus does not answer the riddle of the Sphinx, but kills her by chopping her in two:

Oedipus took an axe and split
The Sphinx from top to bottom
The answers aren't in me, he cried
Maybe your guts have got em ('Song for a Phallus', p. 71)

Hirschberg believes that this signals that the Oedipus in 'Song for a Phallus' is 'not an intelligent, rational man but rather [...] a homicidal maniac' (Hirschberg, p. 114). Hirschberg's observation seems correct as again Hughes Oedipus behaves like a maniac when he kills his mother later in the poem,

He stabs his Mammy in the guts
And smiles into her face ('Song for a Phallus', p. 71)

This gruesome image juxtaposing stabbing and smiling is an example of the black humour Hughes chooses to offset his violent imagery in the poem. The stanzas are broken by the repetition of 'Mamma Mamma'. The significance of this repetition represents Oedipus's cries as the action begins at his birth, or it could represent the child's desire for the mother and mockingly represent his inability to escape from his mother.

Hirschberg believes that 'The fear that Crow meets is his own fear projected and re-experienced as if it were originating from a separate entity' (Hirschberg, p. 115). The fearsome figure of the Sphinx could represent the outwardly projected fear of the female/mother figure that Hirschberg mentions. Keith Sagar agrees that that the symbolic violation of Mamma is a 'transferred manifestation of the repressed incest wish', and he quotes Jung who says

¹⁷ Stuart Hirschberg, *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Guide to the Poems* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 114

Oedipus conquers the Sphinx, which is nothing but fear of the mother [...] This double creature corresponds to the picture of the mother; above, the human lovely and attractive half; below, the horrible animal half, converted into a fear animal through the incest prohibition. (Carl Jung, quoted in Sagar, p. 120)

The repressed incest wish is evident in sexual imagery as Oedipus encounters the female Sphinx who 'waved her legs' at him and 'opened wide her maw' whilst Oedipus 'stood stiff' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 70). This can either be read as frozen in fear or perhaps this suggests that Oedipus is aroused by the female Sphinx and has an erection.

However useful a psychoanalytical reading of 'Song for a Phallus' may be, Paul Bentley disagrees that we can apply these terms to the savage parody of the Oedipal Complex in 'Song for a Phallus' and other poems from *Crow* which 'draw freely on the terms and concepts of psychoanalysis, [they] have no privileged hold on meaning' (Bentley, p. 32). As a parody, the poem only subtly refers to Oedipus's incest with Mammy and these references are used mockingly and playfully, as we learn earlier in the line 'think of the joy will come of it' as she protests against his castration. However, Jung's description of the Sphinx as a 'double creature' is apparent in 'Song for a Phallus' as Hughes makes use of the female double in Mummy and the Sphinx.

Perhaps the desire of Oedipus to sleep with his mother is imprinted onto both his biological mother and the figure of the female Sphinx. Plus the fate of both female figures, who are both killed by his axe splitting them, his mother in the final stanza whom he 'split [...] like a melon' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 71) aligns both characters to a similar fate. Before her death, Oedipus's mother says to Oedipus, 'What you can't understand, she cried/You sleep on it or you sing to it' ('Song for a Phallus', p. 71). Hirschberg believes that these lines mean that Oedipus 'can only relate to what he does not understand through sexual aggression or aesthetic enticement' (Hirschberg, p. 115). This suggests that Oedipus is ruled by his emotions rather than his intellect, which differs from the fate of Jocasta who believes herself to be the cause of the tragedy. In the final scene of Hughes's version of Seneca, Jocasta says to Oedipus

I'm at the root of it I am the root my blood is the dark twisted
root this womb darkness. (Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus*, p. 54)

In 'Song for a Phallus' Mammy doesn't express such sentiments, but Oedipus stabs his mother in the 'guts' which could be read as a penetration and destruction of her womb, the part of Mammy that gave him life. But in the final stanza of 'Song for a Phallus' Oedipus is metaphorically back in the womb,

He split his Mammy like a melon
He was drenched with gore
He found himself curled up inside
As if he had never been bore ('Song for a Phallus', p. 71)

Similar imagery occurs early in Hughes's *Seneca* as Creon says to Oedipus 'murderer you crept back into your mother's/ benighted womb' (Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus*, p. 23). Both instances of a metaphorical reentering of the womb as if never born, suggest that the cycle will begin again and that Oedipus has learnt nothing.

Hirschberg believes that Hughes's Oedipus is 'uniquely cursed, consciously innocent while unconsciously judged guilty and throughout unwittingly the cause of his own doom' (Hirschberg, p. 145). Unlike Sophocles's and Seneca's Oedipus who is morally obliged to defend his city, Hughes's Oedipus does not take any responsibility for his part, and as Hirschberg says he 'merely wishes to escape wholesale death which comes ever closer' (Hirschberg, p. 146). The same is true of the Oedipus Hughes created in 'Song for a Phallus'. Oedipus's fate is inescapable and brings him closer to his demise which reinforces his fallible nature as man. The 'cycle' is also restarted through his struggle.

To conclude, 'Song for a Phallus' presents a paradox as the text appears to be a juvenile text on first appraisal, but deeper analysis shows that Hughes treats the text as an opportunity to mock the lineage of texts exploring the Oedipus myth. Simultaneously, he is able to experiment with using Crow as a writer of his own version of Oedipus. This fits well with Hughes's wider desire within the collection to create a sustained simplicity through Crow's juvenile intellect that produced 'Song for a Phallus'. As this essay has identified, Crow as child Oedipus in 'Song for a

Phallus' raises complex issues of the relationship with the mother, the desire to escape the womb and destiny.