

# BLAME NOT THE SERPENT: SUBVERSION OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN TED HUGHES'S "APPLE TRAGEDY"

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**Abstract:** *Ted Hughes's "Apple Tragedy" challenges the story of creation as written in the Biblical book of Genesis and provides an alternate version of The Fall. Through the complete subversion of the characteristics of the characters, the villain in the Bible is treated with sympathy, thereby, challenges the supremacy of the grand narrative. This paper titled "Blame Not the Serpent: Subversion of Christian belief in Ted Hughes's "Apple Tragedy"" endeavours to expose the poem as a deviation from the Bible. It studies "Apple Tragedy" as a counter narrative or the version from the outcaste, that is, the serpent. There is a complete inversion of the Christian belief of the story and role of God. The study analyses how God is characterised as the villain and serpent is hailed as the tragic hero.*

**Index Terms:** *Grand narrative, Counter narrative, Subversion, Christian belief, Creation, God, serpent*

Ted Hughes's "Apple Tragedy" from the poetry collection *Crow* is explicitly a mock-God poem. Yet, the purpose is not to belittle the story in the Bible or the belief instead problematises the supremacy of the grand narrative and provides an alternate version of The Fall. The characters are retained however, with a complete subversion of their characteristics. This paper titled "Blame Not the Serpent: Subversion of Christian belief in Ted Hughes's "Apple Tragedy"" endeavours to problematise the narrative of the Bible and expose the deviation from the Bible. It studies "Apple Tragedy" as a counter narrative or the version from the outcaste, that is, the serpent. There is a complete inversion of the Christian belief of the story and role of God. In this poem, God is characterised as the villain and serpent is hailed as the tragic hero.

The traditional understanding of a serpent is challenged through Hughes's modern poem with serpent as the protagonist. Long time it has been entrenched in our conscious that serpent is the green-eyed avatar of vices, a detrimentally crooked and venomous beast. Our spiritual foundation is firmly concreted on the concept of God as omnipotent being with no faults and the absolute personification of virtues and goodness. This poem fiercely deconstructs that view through reversing roles and power positions. Serpent is no longer the wicked fiend, but an innocent creature deserving sympathy. God becomes a trickster, interloper, scandalmonger and sadist. The Fall of man as inscribed in "Genesis" of *The Bible* undergoes severe blows while preserving the setting.

The first line is itself a distortion of the Beginning of the Bible. Unlike the belief system, the verses force us the idea of creation as a labour of the serpent. Although it is not written that he "created" the universe, but the word "rested" alludes to the biblical statement: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work" (*The New Revised Standard Version*, Genesis 1: 2). When He changes the contours of the forbidden fruit to a cider, the implicit meaning that alcohol is a bait to sin is conveyed. The "new game" is a challenge for the serpent, thus revealing his crafty crookedness. Besides, here, deceit is heightened worse than the serpent in the grand narrative. In short, here, God tricks the serpent, Adam and Eve into having the Fruit of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The authority of the biblical notion of attributing snake with vices as in "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (*NRSV*, Genesis 3:1) is destabilised by portraying serpent as a naïve creature. In serpent's endeavour to appease Adam, he gets killed. In other words, the serpent plays the role of messiah or the saviour as well as the innocent lamb who bears the sins of the world is sacrifices in order to save humanity. The biblical overtone of Jesus Christ emerges at this point. Hughes integrates the image of serpent and the Saviour. It is a paradox to say that Satan and Jesus Christ are amalgamated into one person.

Another remarkable difference is in the order of the consumption of the fruit. Unlike the biblical version, Adam eats the fruit before Eve. Eve is depicted as an embodiment of lust and desire through the sexual act between the serpent and her. Eve's character deteriorates when she falsely accuses the serpent of raping her. This lie is her attempt to save her face and escape from being labelled as an adulterous woman. In Bible, it was the realisation of being naked that dawned upon them as soon as they ate the fruit. Eve finds a similar realisation – awareness of her sexuality.

Blame is not Eve's alone in 'Apple Tragedy'. Enflamed by that Hughes wittily turns to cider, each character acting out his or her vice: the serpent's for mischief and pleasure, (he had a good drink/ And curled up into a question mark), Adam's for rage and violence, Eve's for sex and lies. Hughes revisits the fall in 'Genesis of Evil'. (Brain 97)

To amplify deviance, the poet distorts God's words after the first parents commit sin and explains ophiophobia. The contradiction between the two extracts can be noted.

So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring<sup>[1]</sup> and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (*NRSV*, Genesis 3:14-15)

God curses the snake for tempting the woman to eat from the forbidden tree.

And Eve started screeching: "Rape! Rape!"/ And stamping on his head. / Now whenever the snake appears she screeches/"Here it comes again! Help! O Help!"/ Then Adam smashes a chair on his head. (Hughes)

These lines reflect that the cause of animosity between the snake and generations of Eve (human race) is the result of a misunderstanding. Serpent is not innately vicious. He suspends the catholic understanding of ophidiophobia as baseless. However, serpent becomes a complex character. According to Karl Heinz Göller,

Even the serpent cannot be reduced to a simple formula. At first it stands for the creative principle, which is unconscious of itself and thus without any self-confidence. But, of course, the snake is also an ancient phallic symbol and thus associated with sexual temptation and seduction... Hughes' rewritings of the Biblical story rub salt into the wounds of Christian theology. (104-105)

The utterance "I am well-pleased" in midst of chaos images God as a sadist. The sole positive side of God that surfaces is honesty. He honestly reports to Adam of his wife's infidelity. However, this same instance can be regarded as God playing the role of a tattler and a sadist. His momentary reaction would have resulted in Adam's suicide until stopped by the serpent. Not only God was a mere passive onlooker when he attempted suicide but also an instigator for the same. The poem is a eulogy to serpent since its portrayal is placed loftier than God. Another point of departure from Bible is in the ending of the Story of the Fall. This poem ends on a pessimistic note with no hope of being saved. On the contrary, even though, the disobedience of the first parents invites the wrath of God on them, there is a promise of a saviour in Bible.

On a surface level reading, "Apple Tragedy" is potent libel writing. A closer examination into the poem renders it as the voice of the unspoken. The chief characters remain the same with significant difference in their characteristic qualities. The plot and actions are manipulated but the framework is maintained unperturbed. Since the actions unfold within the biblical framework, subversion is evident to the readers. The causes of The Fall have different explanation although the consequences are similar. Through the exchange of roles and qualities of God and serpent, Hughes challenges power positions and traditional belief and give an alternate version of the grand narrative.

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