

Crow



A living poetry game.
by Moyra Turkington

Lineage

In the beginning was Scream
 Who begat Blood
 Who begat Eye
 Who begat Fear
 Who begat Wing
 Who begat Bone
 Who begat Granite
 Who begat Violet
 Who begat Guitar
 Who begat Sweat
 Who begat Adam
 Who begat Mary
 Who begat God
 Who begat Nothing
 Who begat Never
 Never Never Never

Who begat Crow

Screaming for Blood
 Grubs, crusts

Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth

Ted Hughes

Dedication: Brand, always - and the tricksters too.

Disclaimer: This game is quite obviously inspired by Ted Hughes's Crow, and its brutal, bloody, railing, sardonic, eponymous hero. The poems I have included, as well as the mythology of Hughes's Crow remain under copyright of his estate. In designing this game I make no claim to them but just to honour the guts, bile and gruesome humour/anguish that they contain.

Design notes: This game is an attempt to slice gaming a different way and in so doing, (for me to) get a different view of it. It's designed (experimentally) for a roleplayer with an aesthetic socket, or maybe an improv poet that hasn't roleplayed before.

Application: I personally think Crow would make a terrific game for literary-type folks to play on a date, for couples in bed in the darkness, as an exercise in a drama class or as a warm up to get a group connected and expressive before an emotionally intensive roleplaying game.

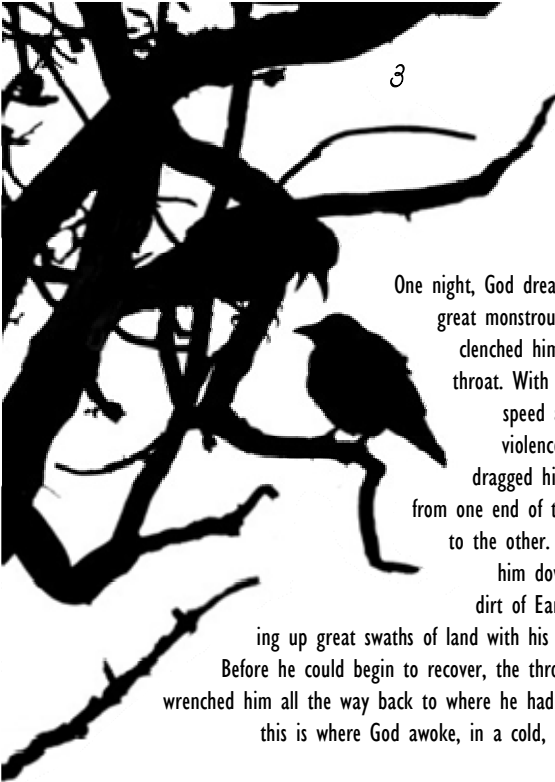
Introduction

Crow is a game where two participants work collaboratively to create poetry together. Unlike many traditional games, Crow has no winners, losers, or competitive engagement; it does not use playing pieces, dice or game paraphernalia.

Poets in Crow do not seek to tell a whole story, nor do they look to become the characters in Crow mythology. Instead, they work together exploring ideas and emotions through extemporaneous thematic exploration and linguistic experimentation to uncover a common sense of meaning.



Origin



One night, God dreamed that a great monstrous hand had clenched him about the throat. With tremendous speed and terrible violence, the hand dragged him, gasping, from one end of the universe to the other. It slammed him down into the dirt of Earth, ploughing up great swaths of land with his divine face. Before he could begin to recover, the throttling hand wrenched him all the way back to where he had begun and this is where God awoke, in a cold, cold, sweat.

Night after night, the hand-nightmare came to torment God, throttling him to Earth and back. God - who created everything that is - could not think of what existed that could be so very strange and hostile to him. The hand revealed itself to have a voice, and with it, cruelly mocked everything that God had created, especially that which God held up as his crowning achievement... Man.

And so there ensued a debate about Man. God stood in his defense of his creation - given the situation and the materials on hand, he insisted, Man is a good invention. In response, the hand contended that Man is a hopeless, worthless, waste.

And while the debate raged on, oblivious to the workings of God or nightmare, Man sent a representative to the gates of heaven to seek an audience with God. There, Man knocked and he waited, knocked and waited, knocked and waited, and God was so consumed in the nightmare that he could not hear.

At last, the debate reached its climax and the hand was left give its final argument to God. Instead of its own words, it asked Man's representative to speak. And it just so happens that Man had sent him to ask God to take life back because Men were fed up with it.. Betrayed, God was enraged and challenged the hand to go see if it could make something better.

And this is just what the nightmare has been waiting for, and so with a howl of delight, it plunged down into matter and made its great attempt.

And thus Crow was born.

God & Crow

The God of Crow is both similar to and different than the God described by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Like that God he is vast and eternal, the creator and father of all. He can love and become angry. However unlike that God, the God of Crow is also old, and tired, and fallible. He can be wearied and worn down, he can be tricked, and he can be very fickle.

A carrion trickster, Crow is without the burden of morality. He is at once cunning, curious, sardonic, cheeky, violent, crude, selfish and naïve. He despises Man yet frequently envies him. He is on a road of discovery - seeking to understand himself, Man, God and the universe. More than that, he is also seeking to make Man, God and the universe understand themselves through him. He's also utterly indestructible.

Both God and Crow exist outside the linear reality of Man. They are not subject to the paltry rules of chronology; past, present and future combine at their whim and pleasure. In their path, geography is boundary-less, culture is transient, even the laws of physics can not hold them. They can literally do anything, knowing as they do of everything that has, does or will exist.

Participants should keep this in mind: God & Crow exist in the metaphorical (and metaphysical!) landscape of poetry. In representing God & Crow in your poems, do not seek to emulate reality, but instead use anything you need to metaphorically represent or emotionally express your ideas.

Playing the Game

When playing Crow, each poet will represent one of the two figures in Crow mythology: Crow or God. Participants should decide who will speak for who before beginning.

Keeping the Crow mythology in mind, participants should have a quick conversation to determine what kind of ideas they would like to explore in their Crow poems. In *The Life and Songs of Crow*, Crow confronts (among other things) love, war, the media, violence, religion, sex, family, death, and rebirth. There aren't any mistakes here, what's relevant to you will make a poem resonant to you.

Next, the participants should use the following poem, *Examination at the Womb Door* to set the tone from the game and help to make the transition into a poetic mind-space. God's poet should call with the questions that are posed in the left column of the poem while Crow's poet should respond with the answers in the right column of the poem.

Examination at the Womb Door

Who owns those scrawny little feet?	Death.
Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face?	Death.
Who owns these still-working lungs?	Death.
Who owns this utility coat of muscles?	Death.
Who owns these unspeakable guts?	Death.
Who owns these questionable brains?	Death.
All this messy blood?	Death.
These minimum-efficiency eyes?	Death.
This wicked little tongue?	Death.
This occasional wakefulness?	Death.
Given, stolen, or held pending trial?	Held.
Who owns the whole rainy, stony earth?	Death.
Who owns all of space?	Death.
Who is stronger than hope?	Death.
Who is stronger than the will?	Death.
Stronger than love?	Death.
Stronger than life?	Death.
But who is stronger than Death?	Me, evidently.
Pass, Crow.	

Ted Hughes



After the poem has been read, Crow's poet should choose a title for the first poem that will be created. It should relate back to one of the ideas that the participants talked about before beginning. The title should be simple, and more often than not, will likely invoke Crow's own name, because, well, Crow is more than a little ego-centric. It's a bonus if the title is wide enough to explore several ideas at once or if the name provides an avenue of symbolic reference or comparison.

For example:

- "Crow Confronts Authority" might intertwine ideas about parenthood, religion and fascism.
- "Genghis Crow" would allow the participants to draw on the historical context and personhood of Genghis Khan, and address ideas about war, leadership, conquest and ambition.
- "Crow's Last Hope" while less specific suggests an emotional state. This poem might be about hope, desire, desperation, alienation and it suggests that Crow will take a strong action in the poem.

Once chosen, Crow's poet speaks the title of the poem out loud. God's poet is now active and can begin.

Poetic Mechanisms

The mechanisms in this game are not present to resolve conflicts between the participants but instead serve to provide dynamism and movement between the contributions of the participants. Also, they help to underline the thematic meaning of the poems by calling on poetic techniques.

Mechanism #1: Naming

At any time, the active poet can push active status by invoking the name of the other poet's figure as part of the poem. For example, God's poet is active. In the opening lines of "Crow Confronts Authority" she says...

"In the sky, the sun's eye stood in absolute command.
Glaring orders down
Upon the bleach bone white of the battlefield."

...and then wants to hand off the poem. She invokes Crow's name by saying: "And Crow...", wherein Crow's poet becomes active and responds:

"The King of Birds,
glares a black eye up into the corona
and rips the last fleshy morsel from the fallen
before cackling: "You that bore me can not bear me."

...and so on.

Mechanism #2: Repetition

When a the non-active poet would like to pull the poem from the active poet, they can echo a word or phrase that the active poet has just used in the poem. If the active poet is happy to hand the poem over, all she needs to do is repeat the word (or phrase) a third time. If, however, she prefers to finish her thought, she can continue on as if the non-active poet had not spoken.

An active poet can not refuse three requests in a row. This mechanic aesthetically works best if the word being repeated is thematically or metaphorically significant to the poem.

For example, in "Crow's Mirror":

Crow's poet is active and has just composed...

"In the heart black night
must-damp in the dim cave's womb
Crow preened his feathers and wept..."

...when God's poet has an idea. She repeats out loud: "preened and wept" to let Crow's poet know that she'd like to take over. However, Crow is in the middle of a thought and wants to finish, so he declines to repeat the phrase and continues with...

"But with the unforgiving dawn
night's shadows all dispelled
Crow sees what his cruel beak has balded..."

And God's poet tries to intercede again by saying: "Balded." And this time Crow's poet is ready and so hands it off by saying "Balded." a third time. Now active, God's poet concludes the poem with...

"and finding himself made Eagle,
screams himself mute with laughter."

Continuing Play

A poem continues until both poets have finished adding to it. While some poems find their fill in a half a dozen finely sharpened statements, others are longer and more fluid. Crow poems should last long enough for Crow to have learned something, taken advantage of someone, had the tables turned on him, or proven a point about Man or God.

Once a poem is ended, a new poem can be begun simply by stating its title. Although God always begins the first poem, the poets should alternate back and forth with each subsequent beginning. It is recommended to try to finish three poems when you play the game for the first time as some poets need some time to get their extemporaneous rhythm down for composing. Once in the rhythm is established, poets can take a stab at a more advanced form.

Mechanism #3: Thrice Told

Thrice Told is an advanced form for Crow poems. The idea of this form is to approach a theme or poem subject three ways to examine it more profoundly. At any point in a poem (though it is most effectively used at the beginning), the active poet can trigger the Thrice Told form by stating a word emphatically, invoking their own name, and then repeating the word emphatically again.

For an example we'll look to one of Hughes's own poems:

Crow's First Lesson

God tried to teach Crow how to talk.

"Love," said God. "Say, Love."

Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea
And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth.

"No, no," said God. "Say Love. Now try it. Love."

Crow gaped, and a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito
Zoomed out and down
To their sundry flesh-pots.

"A final try," said God. "Now, Love."

Crow convulsed, gaped, retched and
Man's bodiless prodigious head
Bulbed out onto the earth, with swiveling eyes,
Jabbering protest --

And Crow retched again, before God could stop him.
And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck and
tightened.

The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept --

Crow flew guiltily off.

Ted Hughes

In this example, God, as the active poet uses the line:

"Love," said God. "Say, Love."

to indicate to Crow's poet that she would like to use a Thrice Told form for this poem. Once the first telling is done, either poet can begin the next telling without having to pass the active status back and forth. (E.g. Crow's poet may say on his turn:

"No, no," said God. "Say Love. Now try it. Love."

without pushing God's poet to take over composing the poem).

Each telling should approach the same idea from a new angle, call on a new metaphor or introduce new complexity on the theme that is being addressed.



Advice

It's important to remember when playing Crow that there is no "right" answer at any given moment of play. Try to remain loose and flexible, and let words and ideas flow. Don't try to force perfection, just reach for something that means something to you in the moment.

The poetry of Crow is not rhyming nor has formal meter. Richness of language and metaphor is much more important to this kind of poetry, and easier to attain in the spontaneity of a game. As a Crow poet, don't try to structure your compositions but try instead to relax into the ideas that you are putting forward.

Keep in mind what kind of beings that God and Crow are as described by their outlines on page four. Use that knowledge to figure out what kind of things God or Crow might do or say and how they might do it. Don't be afraid to bend time and space and mock reality. Crow does it, so can you.

Playing with poetic expression is difficult for some people to do extemporaneously. Where participants feel self conscious or distracted, controlling the environment may help. Consider one of the following techniques:

- Play facing away from one another. This might help alleviate self consciousness. Without someone looking on expectantly, participants may feel less put on the spot.
- Play in the dark. This might help both with self-consciousness and with distraction, allowing the poets to concentrate on the words and the sounds of one another's voice. Try lighting a candle in a dark room, and blowing it out at the end of the *Examination at the Womb Door*.
- Play online. Although playing Crow online will lose some of it's nuance without the ability to hear the other poet's vocal stressing and intonation, the "safety" of playing online may allow for more daring participation and would have the side benefit of producing a transcription of your poems.

Crow's Theology

Crow realized God loved him --
Otherwise, he would have dropped dead.
So that was proved.
Crow reclined, marveling, on his heart-beat.

And he realized that God spoke Crow --
Just existing was His revelation.

But what
Loved the stones and spoke stone?
They seemed to exist too.
And what spoke that strange silence
After his clamour of caws faded?

And what loved the shot-pellets
That dribbled from those strung up mummifying crows?
What spoke the silence of lead?

Crow realized there were two Gods --

One of them much bigger than the other
Loving his enemies
And having all the weapons.

Ted Hughes

