

# AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF TED HUGHES'S "HAWK ROOSTING"

## Ted Hughes'un "Hawk Roosting" Şiirinin Ekoeleştiri ile Okunması

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**ABSTRACT:** Best known for his nature and animal poetry, Ted Hughes (1930-98) has an important place in the history of twentieth century English literature with his poems, stories for children, plays, essays, letters and translations. He has been fascinated with the forces of nature, the world of animals and the challenges of postindustrial society. His diction and controlled language give a sense of order to the violent and chaotic natural world, drawing attention to the immediate experiences. Ecocriticism, "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty:1996, xviii) is chosen for reading "Hawk Roosting" since this poem presents Hughes's intense insights into the natural world. This article exemplifies the ways in which Hughes explores both violence and order in nature through the daily experiences of a hawk in its own habitat. The hawk acts in an instinctive manner in line with the natural order.

**Keywords:** Ted Hughes, Ecocriticism, Nature Poet, "Hawk Roosting".

**ÖZ:** Doğa ve hayvan şiirleriyle tanınan Ted Hughes yazdığı çocuk hikayeleri, oyunları, denemeleri, mektupları ve çevirileri ile 20. Yüzyıl İngiliz edebiyat tarihinde önemli bir yere sahiptir. Doğanın muazzam güçleri, hayvanların dünyası ve endüstriyelleşme sonrasında çevrenin ve toplumun durumu şairin ilgisini çeken konulardır. Tasvir ettiği doğal çevrenin anlık tecrübelerini anlatan şair, şiirlerindeki sözcük seçimi ve dildeki kontrollü tutumu, vahşet ve karmaşa içindeki doğal ortama bir nevi düzen getirir. Hughes'un doğal yaşamla ilgili yoğun içgörüsünü içeren "Hawk Roosting" eserinin okunmasında fiziksel çevre ve edebiyat arasındaki ilişkiyi inceleyen ekoeleştiri yaklaşımı seçilmiştir. Bu çalışma şairin

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“Hawk Roosting” şiirinde doğadaki şiddet ve düzen konularını tüneyen bir şahinin kendi yaşam alanında günlük yaşadıklarını gözlemleyerek anlatmaktadır. Doğal düzene uyumlu olarak şahin iç güdülerıyla hareket etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ted Hughes, Ekoeleştiri, Doğa Şairi, “Hawk Roosting”.

## INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes (1930-1998), Poet Laureate of England from 1984 until his death, is one of the prolific figures of the twentieth century English literature with his poems and short stories for both adults and children. Besides poetry, Hughes’s works include plays, translations, essays and letters. He is interested in extraordinary forms of knowledge, creative writing, environmental activism, and national movements against agricultural and industrial contamination (Gifford, 2009: 1). Hughes is aware of a poet’s significant public responsibility as a pioneer for dealing with the most disturbing problems of their times. These issues include concerns linked to human and nature relations, self-destructive spirit of human beings, life and death, animals, unconscious life, and conscious decisions. His passion for nature arises as a result of growing up in rural areas of Yorkshire and as a child he has always been enchanted by animals. His poetry develops from his childhood experiences, interrelating animal life with the atrocities of human kind. Analyzing Hughes’s war-poetry, Meyers finds a connection between animals and soldiers that both kill their own kind with fierce primitivism (2013: 32).

In addition to the violent characteristic of animal life and its connection to human life, Hughes’s poetry is embedded with the natural habitat. A connection with nature, rural England with farms, mountains and moors have given Hughes great inspiration to write poetry. His poetry can be regarded as a return to territory, hostility, fierceness, cruel behaviors of animals such as foxes, hawks, horses, jaguars and crows. This lifelong interest in nature and the poet’s environmental consciousness make Hughes unsurprisingly a nature poet, and this commitment later shows itself in his works of environmental community and his ecological activism.

A strong sense of the natural order of things has existed in Hughes’s creative DNA. Since his teenage years, Hughes has been keen on poetry and began writing poems (Lidström, 2015: 17). At the age of 18, he attended National Service and after that period he studied anthropology and archeology in Cambridge until 1954. On account of his diverse education in the humanities, he alludes to human history and mythology in his works. Religion also functions as one of the cores for managing the interior power, as it lessens the otherness of nature by enclosing mind and environment (Zerenler, 2002:

1). When religion has lost its power in the twentieth century Western culture, reconciling the separation between mind and alienated nature has become the modern man's responsibility. (Zerenler, 2002: 1). In general, Hughes aims to discover the pressure and relation between human's inner and external natural world and this discovery is carried out for finding a way to recover from hardships and find reconciliation. (Gifford, 2009: 7).

## ECOCRITICAL THEORY

Cheryll Glotfelty (1996, xviii) describes ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment". Ecocriticism as a discipline premises on the reciprocal connection between humanities and the natural world. The theory is also worth mentioning, since scholars support eco-over enviro- because enviro- is anthropocentric, centers human, and implies that humans are surrounded by everything which is not them, the environment, while eco- implies inter-reliant societies, incorporated systems, and strong bonds between component parts (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xx). Emergence of the theory is possibly derived from the characteristics of the new century "the century of environment" that comprises literary-environmental interrelations; ecology and population-based difficulties inescapably and progressively advocate the necessity of including environmental considerations for any kind of literary criticism, handling social and physical reality (Love, 2003: 1). Ecocriticism includes nonhuman features in addition to human contexts and thoughts (Love, 2003: 1). Rudd (2010: 8) defines origins of the perspective as having "roots in the ethical and political concerns of ecology and environmentalism." The aim of the theory is explained clearly by Serpil Oppermann (1999: 29) as "to bring a transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues at large." The environmental issues related with both nature, landscape and urban (Oppermann 1999: 30), as a result of destructive alterations on Earth, have endangered not only human species but also all other living creatures. The devastating alterations include global warming, earthquakes, habitat destructions, air, soil and water pollution, resource depletion, overpopulation, acid rains etc. all of which have caused an ecological collapse on Earth. With this recognition, humankind, feeling guilt-ridden, begins to investigate nature and its effect on human.

Ecocriticism, due to associations with today's ecological crisis, is both concerned with nature and urban landscape. The term ecocriticism has been coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. However, Cheryll Glotfelty revives the term and advocates that it should refer to the widespread critical field which was previously known as "the study of nature writing" at Western Literature

Association meeting in 1989 (Branch and Grady, 1994). From then on the theory has flourished in practice: in articles and papers, thus its recognition has become independent (Branch and Grady, 1994). For Cokinos (1994) "Ecocriticism is fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy, one that investigates and helps make possible the connections among self, society, nature, and text." Cokinos continues with inadmissibility of ecocritical view which is opponent to and unaware of language-centered literary theory (Cokinos, 1994). Cook (1994) highlights the extensiveness of ecocriticism with its interdisciplinary approach including ecology, topography, environmental history, philosophy, cultural studies and literature, among other fields. Ecocritical approaches, thus, can be chronological, metaphorical, educational, hypothetical, psychological, methodical, or it can include combinations of the above. Cook (1994) also mentions the questioning of humans for placing themselves in life and using biology, society and politics for defining their place in the natural habitat. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, since it is used in order to comprehend "the connectedness of all things, including the life of the mind and the life of the earth" (Branch and Grady, 1994). One of the major challenges of the theory is comprehension of nature and culture as intermingled rather than separate components of a dualistic construct (Armbruster, 2001: 4). Ecocriticism is the study of culture and its products namely, literature, scientific theories, and art works, and it is associated with human relation to nature.

Literature has a crucial role in an enormously complicated global system in which thoughts, matter, and energy interact, and ecocriticism expands "the world" as a concept by actually including the whole ecosphere (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xix). The theory also functions as a response to environmental devastation, natural and artificial difficulties, requisites, and disasters, as it is necessary to grasp the link between human and the natural world. Historian Donald Worster (1993: 27) observes that global crisis occurs as a result of the dysfunctional moral system of society rather than ecosystem. He proposes that in order to overcome the crisis, human beings shall realize their impact on nature and recognize those moral systems, restructure them accordingly and properly. As Worsters underlines (Worsters, 1993: 27), "Historians, scholars, anthropologists and philosophers cannot reform but they can help with the understanding." On the other hand, ecological crises are the outcomes of disconnections and disharmony between human and the natural world. On accounts of the rising technology and the specialization of the natural phenomena separately, human beings fail to appreciate the interrelatedness between technological and natural matters (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xix). Similarly, as people live in a technology-governed era, ecocriticism urges a concern for nature and ecology; it also extends literary criticism to the scope of

environment and ecosystem that unavoidably necessitates a continued relation between literature and ecosystem in environmental sciences and willingly stimulates an interdisciplinary field (Xu and Nangong, 2012: 88). With the rise in environmental problems, people become more inclined to protect the environment and ecosystem as a concept has become an essential part of various disciplines in the humanities such as art, culture, literature, philosophy, morals, politics etc. As a consequence of this situation, ecology is a universal matter that people should face and cope with (Xu and Nangong, 2012: 88). In literary criticism, too, ecocriticism has its favorable place as a method for analyzing literary works with considerations of nature, human, nonhuman, environment, and interconnections among them. Ecocriticism provides an insight into environmental consciousness and a refined taste to the idea of nature.

## TEXT AND CONTEXT

Hughes's poetry presents the poet's fascination with creative-destructive forces in nature such as life and death, implicitly suggesting the reader to imagine the thin line between vulgarity and civility. In this context the wild and instinctual nature of animals is actually a metaphor for the civilized humanity and its discontents.

Inspired by nature and animals, Ted Hughes has written a multitude of poems that bear ingenious metaphors, resourceful imagery, reflective language, and speech rhythms. His poem 'Hawk Roosting', which was first published in an early volume of poetry collection called *Lupercal* (1960) is examined as an example to suggest that Hughes uses animals as metaphors for displaying his own visions of life which emphasize the destructive forces and the energy in nature. The article examines the poem by displaying examples and interprets the poem in terms of life experiences and stance of a bird in order to explain the term "environment", in this case an environment recreated and ruled by the powerful hawk. The hawk in the poem's landscape is portrayed as the fittest and the strongest creature to survive in the evolutionary process. Hughes poetry is a valuable source to search the relationships amongst human, poetry and the natural world and to emphasize that human is only a small part of the ecosystem. 'Hawk Roosting' is a worthy poem for ecocriticism as it consists ecological issues and human-animal relations. This article argues that Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting' can open up the poem to environmental debates with its references to the hawk's treatment of its landscape, and the bird's own species. Hughes has contributed to issues related to nature, animals, non-humans and humans. In this dramatic monologue, Hawk is literally and metaphorically suggestive of intelligence, arrogance, superiority and aggression as it is clearly depicted throughout the poem.

In today's world, the species name is given to war snipers and vehicles as it connotes with superlative features and great hunters. Therefore the hawk may be a symbol of a sniper, a killing machine, or a dictator as well in its natural environment exploring and exploiting its immediate surroundings. The poem gives voice to a natural predator as it meditates on its innate feelings and thoughts. Thus, the title of the poem is overtly suggestive; it denotes a predatory bird waiting fiercely for his prey.

The hawk, which is the poetic persona, is roosting in its natural habitat. In the first two stanzas physical superiority is detailed with eyes, head, and feet. It is on top of a high tree on a clear day illuminated by sun rays ready to inspect and observe its prey conveniently. Doubtlessly, it is created for "tearing off heads" with its perfect physical traits such as the "hooked head" and "hooked feet", sharp vision and manners. Hughes presents brutal traits of the hawk by utilizing poetic imagery and this presentation includes nonhuman features. The poet underlines animal life and its relation with ecology.

The final two stanzas justify its cruel actions. The hawk acts in perfect accordance with its inborn nature with the support of the ultimate source of energy - the sun - behind it. Hence the pairs of stanzas contribute to a sense of regularity which again reinforces the tight control of the bird in its habitat:

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

The hawk speaks with utmost authority, power and pride. He has the tone of a ruthless dictator, which reminds the readers of the natural order that of the survival of the fittest in the theory of evolution. It kills in order to survive: "My manners are tearing off heads – The allotment of death". In this sense with its characteristics of "hooked head and hooked feet" this animal would kill as it pleases, arbitrarily.

The poem has a circular pattern in order to highlight the fact that the hawk as such a powerful and enduring bird declares its rule, that it is to "sit in the top of the wood" and "going to keep things like this" for many years to come. The hawk, with its human features, actually is a symbol of inhumanity and tyranny which accepts no change and no counter-opinion.

Repetitive use of first person pronoun suggests a sense of arrogance and portrays a self-centered nature of the bird. With Hughes's meticulous word choice and syntax, the readers are exposed to the fierceness and strength

of the bird with absolute words such as "kill" and "tearing off." The hawk can be interpreted in two senses: literally and metaphorically, the former is linked to the bird that is intelligent and has sharp eye-sight, and because of these features emperors and nobles also benefitted from that bird for hunting in the middle ages; the latter, on the other hand, some human behaviors are attributed to its features such as "having eyes like it", "watch someone like a hawk", and "hawkish stance". These phrases highlight the sharp-eye sight and the violent feature of the bird.

The poem has regular structure with four-line verses and each of them has similar length, this similarity may be used for foreshadowing the feeling of ruthless domination. Enjambments are also used in lines 2 to 3, 6 to 7, 10 to 11, 12 to 13, and 18 to 19. Although the language is rather strict and ordered, the enjambments might be for illustrating the flight and movement of the bird. The use of negatives (nothing, no arguments, no change and no sophistry) may imply a political speech, counting on strength while rejecting rhetorical questions. Hughes, with simple and direct language, word choice, and neat line length provides an extended metaphor for the manners of a tyrant or power-seeking leader. The regular lines, order and the circularity in the structure of the poem accords well with the innate order in the natural world. The nature is textualized through the poet's references to the life of a hawk and its implications to the traits of a dictator. Indeed, Hasan (2012: 177) states that for Hughes, the unavoidable consequence of witnessing terrors, massacres, and viciousness of Second World War are depicted in animal imagery to define tragedy and devastation of the war. Although Hughes has been criticized for being violent in his poems he reveals the hurt and disfigured shape of nature tormented and damaged by humans in 'Hawk Roosting' (Hasan, *ibid.*: 184). Hence, it is a symbol for human cruelty. On the other hand, however, for Dyson (1990: 102, as cited in Hasan, 2012:184) "the bird is not fascist nor the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator." Nature has become the victim of human brutality and negligence and as a consequence Hughes uses violence for reformation and restating the vitality of current presence of nature (Hasan, 2012: 184). The opening line of the poem "I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed" establishes the theme of the poem; the bird comes into sight in a high position while ignoring the rest of the world. The central theme of the poem is obviously nature, human, and animal relation. However, the hawk may also be interpreted as a Nazi symbol, with an eagle standing on the top of a wreath. Scholars find a link between fascist attitudes of it and First-Second World War and this connection proposes a critical irony to Hitler (Istiak, 2016: 7). On the other hand, the hawk as a representation of arrogance and superiority, reveals the voice and thoughts of nature. Composed through the hawk's point of view, the poem uses a series of personification

with reference to “feet”, “manners”, and “argument” and therefore establishes a connection between human and the nature. In each stanza the tone and the mood of the poem are built towards a feeling of authority, self-directedness, viciousness, and superiority. The sinister and threatening tone has a continuous effect in the final stanza. The poem finishes on a horrifyingly alarming image that it is determined to continue acting arbitrarily and cruelly, which is similar to the natural world order in the primitive sense.

Fletcher (2004: 4) claims that owing to participating in nature, poetry expresses the relation between nature and humanity. In ‘Hawk Roosting’, the indestructible connection indicates “the presence of nature within humans” (Lidström, 2015: 150). The description of the hawk becomes a means to define and explore the cruelty in people. Similar natures of the bird as predators and humans as dictators are depicted via the hawk’s point of view; for example arrogance, self-direction, violence, tyranny, and self-esteem are traits that belong to humans. The hawk’s selfishness is emphasized in lines “And the earth’s face upward for my inspection” and “Now I hold Creation in my foot”. The reference to “creation” also symbolizes that the hawk is the master of nature. Similarly, the hawk’s greed is underlined in the line “I kill where I please because it is all mine.” Hughes continues to depict human traits through the bird’s bigotry in lines “My eye has permitted no change.” and “I am going to keep things like this.” Lidström (2015: 154) proposes that for Hughes nature is primarily a core for explaining and discovering the DNA of humanity metaphorically. Through the instinctual behavior of animals, one can find a resemblance between the natural procedures and environmental relations beyond human influence. In ‘Hawk Roosting’ the hawk is a symbol of human description, it is depicted as a murderer: it rehearses “perfect kills and eat”, it dwells in the most suitable place to catch its preys.

## CONCLUSION

Consequently, Hughes personifies the bird deliberately to connect the animal with humanity. Some similarities between the hawk and the human nature are presented as they are both merciless, unalterable and having the potential for damage and destruction (Bandyopadhyay, 2013: 2). By portraying the hawk and its qualities, he actually depicts the contemporary man and his personality. Evidently, ecocritical view provides the necessary vocabulary and perspective for analyzing Hughes’ poetry, especially in his representation of human characteristics via animal personas as in ‘Hawk Roosting’.





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