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Literary Analysis

Violence, Aggression and Mythopoeia in Ted Hughes's Poetry: An Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract: The paper examines the inherent violence, aggression, and mythical consciousness in the poetry of Ted Hughes from an ecocritical perspective. Since ecocriticism emerged as a critical approach to studying the relationship between the physical environment and literature, this paper shows the manifestations of nature's vitality, along with the mythical connections between humans and animals. It also examines how Hughes's predatory imagery reveals nature's instinctive vitality, aggression, and mythic force. Ted Hughes's poetry is characterized by visceral, fundamental imagery, an intense interest in non-human existence, and a continual preoccupation with human consciousness. The author examines Hughes's ecological consciousness as a post-pastoral poet who challenges anthropocentric assumptions and explores how he reinvents traditional myths and mythical figures to address contemporary realities and the complex relationship between humans and nature. In doing so, this study deals with Hughes's biocentric vision and his emphasis on symbiotic coexistence between humanity and the natural world.

Keywords: Violence, aggression, mythical consciousness, ecocriticism, biocentrism

Ted Hughes (1930-1998), the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom (from 1984 to 1998) was one of the twentieth century leading and influential British poets, acclaimed for his visceral portrayals of imagery, language, myths and profound engagement with the natural world. According to Greenblatt and Abrams (2006), he was born in the rugged countryside of Yorkshire and was the son of William Henry and Edith Hughes. William Henry was one of the seventeen men from a regiment of several hundred to return from Gallipoli during World War I, and this tragedy became deeply rooted in Ted Hughes's consciousness, later informing his war poems. His deep entanglement and early experiences with the landscape of Yorkshire and rural environments largely shaped his poetic imagination, fostering his profound attachment with animals, rudimentary forces and ecosystems that run through in his animal poems. He got married with the American born poet Sylvia Plath in 1956. As poets, they indulged themselves in exploring the world of sensation and raw feelings. Unlike Plath's poetry, which often foregrounds suffering and victimhood, Hughes's poetry frequently imagines the world through predatory instinct, animal aggression, and elemental vitality.

Another important aspect of Hughes's poetry is his myth making quality that made him distinct from other English poets of "the Movement" including Philip Larkin and his coherent lucidity and highly conventional forms. He developed a sense of mythical consciousness in his poems with violent metaphors, dark brooding tone, raw imagery and with electrifying descriptions. While he was in the last year of his study in Pembroke College, Cambridge, he shifted his attention from English to archaeology and anthropology, marking his mythical structures in his poems. Poetry Foundation (n.d.) suggests that apart from the mythopoeia and psychological depth in his poems, Hughes is celebrated as an Eco poet- a writer whose writings not only portray the startling imagery

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of nature or elemental forces but also highlight the ecological awareness and environmental integrities.

As an Eco poet, his works surpass the traditional boundaries of the romantic writers who believe that nature is always pure, benevolent and a source of spiritual renewal. On the other hand, Hughes depicts nature as "raw, elemental and often violent", a theme that is central to the ecology driven thought. He also illustrates the troubled and complex relationship between humans and non-human world in his poems, questioning the anthropocentric notion of the universe that assumes human beings are superior to all other life forms. His poems vividly depict the manifestations of vitality, violence and aggression of the natural world, illuminating both its inherent value and the impact of human actions on other landscapes and species.

Besides, his works often have special connections between brutality and aggression with myth making that ultimately paves the way for a mythopoeic landscape by combining raw and elemental forces, naturalistic vitality, animal instincts and human consciousness. The paper shows how violence, aggression and mythopoeic constructions in Ted Hughes's poetry function together to subvert the traditional perceptions between human and non-human, culture and nature, reason and emotion using ecocriticism as the theoretical framework.

His poetry depicts nature as violent, raw and elemental contrary to the romantic notion that nature is tranquil, pure and benevolent. The paper challenges anthropocentric notion and highlights ecological consciousness, biocentrism and a narrative mythopoeia that questions modern withdrawal from nature. The paper establishes Ted Hughes as post pastoral eco poet who deconstructs the nostalgic idealism of the countryside, its forces and inhabitants. *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) includes Hughes's most accomplished poems like "The Hawk in the Rain", "The Jaguar", and "Wind" that establishes him as the poet of elemental sensibilities. *Lupercal* (1960) contains poems like "Hawk Roosting", "Pike", "Bullfrog", and "Relic" where Hughes explores the themes of raw instinct, animal life, survival and brutality of nature. Gifford (2022) mentioned in *An Ecocritical Reading of the Poetry of Ted Hughes*-

> …Hughes's early poetry that was distinctly anti-pastoral, celebrating elemental forces in landscapes and animals while also satirising humans who were disconnected from the powerful emotions and dreams of their own inner lives. Hughes sought to counter pastoral idealisation of the countryside, its inhabitants and its elemental forces. His first two volumes satirise pastoral defences against the forces of nature, but also celebrate what he called 'the elemental power circuit of the universe' at work in the inner life of humans, animals and landscapes (p. 409).

Later poems like "Wodwo" and "Theology" from *Wodwo* (1967) and "Crow Blacker than Ever", "Crow's Last Stand", and "Crow's Fall" from the seminal work collection *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) of Ted Hughes shows a kind of reinvention of myths from ecological perspectives. Hughes's mythopoeia, a fundamental framework of understanding his poetic world highlights mythic figures and narratives as part of larger cosmological narratives. While poets of earlier traditions (Romantic and Modernist) used myths to explicate human values, Hughes constructed myths to embody existential truths about life, death and renewal. Thus by resisting sentimental pastoralism and mythologizing nature's violence, Hughes creates a poetic ecology that has both harmony and conflict as essential for the living world.

Ecocriticism is the literary approach that investigates literature about the way human beings relate to the natural environment. It explores the reciprocal relationship between humanities and the natural world by addressing the inherent ecological consciousness. This modern environmental movement is called the green movement was initiated by Rachel Carson's revolutionary 1962 book *Silent Spring.* The book highlights the ferocity of pesticides on nature and predicts the impending annihilation if we, human beings don't change our relationship with the natural world (Carson, 1962). Tialila (2022) thinks that "the idea that nature is meant for serving human need has often incited a selfish utilitarian attitude towards nature." The often quoted definition of ecocriticism is

given by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) in the 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*.

> What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (p. xiv).

Ecocriticism is deeply connected with ecological crisis as they both are concerned with nature and urban landscape. The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Rueckert, 1978). Tyson (2023) in her book *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* highlights some fundamental questions for ecocriticism. The key questions include how literature embodies nature and human-nature relationships, it questions whether the representation of nature is anthropocentric, ecocentric or mixture of the both, questions capitalist ideology and the representation of nature in terms of gender, race, socioeconomic class, national or cultural identity and explores environmental protection and indifference as well. Ted Hughes's poetry portrays nature as a powerful, primal and violent force by challenging the romanticized depictions. Animals in his poems are the embodiment of raw and primal instincts focusing on the interconnectedness of all the living things. Gifford (2022) in chapter 24 of *Studying English Literature in Context* provides a foundational ecocritical reading of the poetry of Ted Hughes, "positioning ecocritical concepts are revealing of aspects of Hughes's poetry: pastoral, post-pastoral, otherness, inhabitation, biosemiology, ecofeminism, material ecocriticism, agency, natureculture, and re-enchantment" (p. 407). This paper attempts to show the visceral presence of violence, aggression and mythic imagination in Ted Hughes's selected poetry through an ecocritical lens. The paper shows biocentrism and mythopoeic ecology, highlighting ecological consciousness and interdependence of all living entities. Hayat et al. (2019) thinks that Hughes has established "a new tradition in consonance with the environmental protection of the twentieth century."

All the poems of Ted Hughes in The *Hawk in the Rain* (1957) make him as the poet of elemental sensibilities. He shows biocentrism, deep ecological consciousness, relations between humanities and the animal world, and focuses on interconnectedness of all living organisms through the violence, rawness and natural instinct of the animal world. The poem "The Hawk in the Rain" by Ted Hughes challenges the romantic notion of the nature and the anthropocentric view that highlights humans are the masters of the environment. It shows a post-pastoral depiction of nature and highlights the inherent violence, aggression and the rawness of nature. The poem also delves into the stark contrast between human vulnerability and the animalistic endurance in the midst of tempestuous environment.

Another poem "The Jaguar" dives into the tension between the raw and untamable force of nature and the artificial confinement imposed by human civilization. The poem portrays the degradation of nature in captivity and at the same time celebrates the indomitable instinct of the natural world. The zoo symbolizes human domination and the jaguar represents the free spirit by indicating resistance, primal instinct and nature's sovereignty. The poem is a stern critique of anthropocentric notion and it shows the very vitality and resilience of nature through the rawness, violence and aggression of the jaguar though in captivity. The jaguar is presented as a "mythic" force evoking awe and fear rather than inducing pity and completely subdued by human civilization like the other animals.

Ted Hughes's poem "Wind" highlights nature's tremendous force, exploring the very susceptibility of human beings and the flexibility of nature in the midst of chaotic and tempestuous situation. The poet shows nature's ferocity, hostility and rawness in the poem while projecting the vulnerable condition of human beings in a tempestuous situation. Thus, the poet dismantles human

centric notion and shows biocentrism by projecting nature's supremacy. The poem depicts nature as an independent entity, shows its destructive nature while human existence seems very frail.

The violence, aggression and elemental sensibilities of the natural world were much more prominent in the *Lupercal* (1960) and it contains poems like 'Hawk Roosting', 'Pike', 'Bullfrog', and 'Relic'. The themes of raw instinct, animal life, survival and brutality of nature were the main focus of these poems.

Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting" centers around the predator hawk that embodies instinctual supremacy and raw natural power. The poem presents a biocentric view of nature by challenging human supremacy or human-centric worldviews. The hawk's natural instinct and monologue represent it as a ruthless and amoral creature positioning itself at the top of the food chain. The poem shows the interconnectedness of all living organisms while at the same time acts as a critique of human egoism and supremacy. İnan and Boldan (2018) suggest that "Hawk is literally and metaphorically suggestive of intelligence, arrogance, superiority and aggression as it is clearly depicted throughout the poem". The poem suggests nature's resilient authority by asserting natural law and the survival of the fittest. It again shows that natural law and instinct are absolute and unchanging unlike human systems.

Ted Hughes's "Pike" is a deep eco-centric poem that presents nature as raw, violent and independent entity by contrasting the romanticized or anthropocentric views. The poem explores the violence, aggression and predatory nature of the pike and serves as a critique of human intrusion into the natural habitat of the pike. The poem also shows the power dynamics between the human observer and the non-human world. It celebrates nature as autonomous and independent entity. The poem depicts the dynamics of aquatic ecosystem, human-animal relationship and deep ecological awareness of the poet.

The animal poem "Bullfrog" by Ted Hughes explores the power, intense raw vitality, and independent autonomy of the bullfrog by going beyond the romantic notion of the nature. The poem immediately rejects the sentimental or pastoral notion and presents the bullfrog as a kind of "threat / As of liner looming". The "otherness" of nature or biocentrism is expressed through the active and commanding presence of the bullfrog by challenging human superiority. The speaker primarily perceives the bullfrog as a "mythical beast" and "No bigger than a rat" but the perception changes when he hears the bullfrog's "liner looming croak". It indicates the formidable gap between expectation and reality and the danger of anthropocentric imposition. The speaker describes the croak as "disgorging your gouts of darkness" and "whole fogs full of horns". This suggests that nature has its own voice and is absolutely independent irrespective of human explanation or endorsement. The resilience, vitality, and rawness of the bullfrog are expressed through its "pumping out" fogs, 'disgorging" darkness of the swamp, "lithe, long, strong legs and "bass strings". The poem also shows a tendency of humans to control nature by implying the bullfrog as a "boy's prize" held in "old woman's hands". This implies human desire to tame or control nature but the previous commanding voice of the bullfrog surpasses everything.

Ted Hughes's another significant poem "Relic" depicts violence, aggression, indifference, and brutality of the natural world through a "jawbone at the sea's edge". The poem is absolutely detached from human morality and sentimental romanticized exploration. It highlights nature's ceaseless cycling, inherent brutality of the natural forces and synthesizes the intrinsic notion that destruction is necessary for creation. It presents the ocean not as an idyllic landscape but a cold, brutal, dark and predatory natural force. The sea has been depicted as a site of constant consumption ("The deeps are cold: / In that darkness camaraderie does not hold") where survival largely depends on devouring others ("Nothing touches but, clutching, devours"). The sea's achievement has been compared with destruction and devouring others and left with "shells, verterbrae, claws, carapaces, skulls". It suggests the natural production even in a kind of destruction. The last "curved jawbone" image as a "cenotaph" highlights the notion that whether it is human or animal, everything is subject to the natural laws and the purpose of life is to survive in the natural cycle. The poem rejects the

sentimental views of nature and ultimately highlights nature's supremacy and non-human world where "none grow rich".

Ted Hughes's mythopoeia is a unique way of reinventing myths and a part of larger cosmological phenomena. He constructs myths or mythical figures to explain human life, nature and existence. He recreates myths not as a decoration but uses them as a kind of tool to depict primal energy, psychological conflicts and humanity's alienation from nature. The poem "Wodwo" explores the tension between human consciousness and the non-human natural world. The poem features a mythical creature 'Wodwo' (wild man of the woods) who acts as a kind of bridge between human consciousness and primal nature. This mythical wild man of the woods is exploring a riverbank, gripping with continuous search for identity and existence and ultimately questioning his place in the ecosystem. The poet shows a profound alienation of humans from the natural world while at the same time acknowledging our sentimentalized position in the ecosystem. Thus, the poem is about reviving ancient myth like wild man figure, transforming the myth into a psychological exploration and creating new myth about identity and existence by challenging the anthropocentrism and accepting biocentrism. It is a symbolic poem talking about the wandering of the mythical creature wodwo (half-human and half-animal) through nature in search of his identity. His bewildered condition is heightened through the rhetorical questions like "What am I?", "What am I doing here in mid-air?" and "… do I fit in their world?". The existential angst and identity crisis of wodwo are paramount through the remarks of the mythical creature like "separate from the ground and not rooted" where the surrounding trees, weeds and animals belong to the very environment. The wodwo primarily believes that he is the "exact centre" but in reality he is just a lost, confused and a very small fragment of a larger ecosystem. Thus, the poem criticizes the anthropocentric notion and highlights the symbiotic existence. The poem also criticizes the pastoral romanticism by presenting nature as "dark", menacing, and indifferent. The poem ends with a resolution "I'll go on looking" suggests a continuous and relentless search for meaning and existence. Thus the poem is an exploration of the broken bond between man and the natural environment where human existence is trivial and not superior.

The mythopoeic creation of Ted Hughes is his poem "Theology" that subverts the Judeo-Christian creation myth. The poet reinterprets this creation myth as destructive and very unnatural process because it separates humanity from the natural world. The poet changes the biblical story of Adam and Eve and thus recreates the myth of Adam and Eve in the poem. Hughes presents a dark ecosystem of devouring where he shows the inherent violence, aggression, consumption and subsequent alienation which are very natural process according to him. The poet shows that the separation of Adam and Eve is not a result of a divine fall from grace but it is aptly a natural order of consumption.

> Adam ate the apple.
> Eve ate Adam.
> The serpent ate Eve.
> This is the dark intestine. (L. 5-8)

The poem offers a rejection of the anthropocentric paradise (harmonious and divine garden) and shows a biocentric reality where humans are subject to material consumption. The poem asserts that the "facts" are not spiritual but a 'corruption" and rooted in the "dark intestine" and biological needs. The serpent is a traditional symbol of sin and temptation but the poet shows its natural instinct of devouring as a natural cycle in the garden. It is the human interpretation that made the serpent villain. Thus, the poem highlights a special kind of mythopoeia of Ted Hughes that denotes his ecological consciousness as well.

Ted Hughes's dark and influential poetry sequence is his *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970) that features a mythological, skeptical and eternal crow character. In this *Crow* series, Hughes explores the themes of violence, creation and human consciousness by his mythopoeia. Gifford and Roberts (1981) aptly introduce *Crow* by-

Crow holds a uniquely important place in Hughes oeuvre. It heralds the ambitious second phase of his work, lasting roughly from the late sixties to the late seventies, when he turned from direct engagement with the natural world to unified mythical narratives and sequences.

"Crow Blacker than Ever" by Ted Hughes's is a remarkable poem highlighting the mythic figure "Crow'' as a malicious trickster. The poem presents a post-apocalyptic and chaotic world where there is a complete separation and mutual revulsion between God and humanity. The poem offers a sarcastic rewriting of creation emphasizing chaos, absurdity and a state of agony and suffering. The poem is a critique of anthropocentrism where the non-human and mythic figure crow survives and human civilization fails. It shows nature not as an idyllic landscape but raw, violent and brutal. It portrays the rawness and untamed condition of nature by reflecting eco consciousness which is beyond human control. The poem highlights the failure of human-centered universe and a separation from the God himself.

When God, disgusted with man,
Turned towards heaven.
And man, disgusted with God,
Turned towards Eve,
Things looked like falling apart. (L. 2-6)

On the other hand, the crow represents a primordial and resilient entity that survives the chaotic world and joins heaven and earth together ("nailed them together, / Nailing Heaven and earth together"). But the heaven and the earth creaked at the joint and "became gangrenous and stank -

A horror beyond redemption." The poem reveals the eco anxiety, disorderly cosmos and the deconstruction of hierarchy. Thus, the myth making quality of Ted Hughes makes him a poet of different flavor.

Another significant poem of this series is "Crow's Last Stand" that exposes human hubris and stresses raw and indomitable vitality and flexibility of the non-human world. The poem presents a bleak, fiery and destructive setting where the crow remains resilient and "a final obstacle" in the midst of a burning world. The crow remains invincible and "limpid" and witnesses the chaos from "its scorched fort". The crow survives against all odds specially "burning" environment and "furnace clinkers" that shows non-human supremacy. The crow here is like a mythical figure that transcends all obstacles and remains victorious in the end just opposite to the human fallacies and their inadaptability. The crow is an ecological agent and the inherent violence and vitality are intrinsic to its character. Thus the poem is a critique of anthropocentrism and romantic notion of nature and highlights nature's hegemony through the mythical creature crow.

Ted Hughes's "Crow's Fall" shows the metamorphosis of the crow from white color to black after its hasty attack on the sun. This transformation serves as an allegory of human self-destruction and hubris to dominate nature. Crow's attack on the sun represents vicious anthropocentric ambition to tame nature resulting "charred" degradation. Amit Roy (2025) in his *A Critical Perspective on Animal Imagery in "Crow's Fall"* shows the transformation of "a simple bird into a mythic symbol through which the poet interrogates themes of power, pride, and the precarious boundary between humanity and nature." The crow initially "white" signifies innocence but rebellious against natural force. This reflects the arrogance and desire of humanity to defy and conquer nature rather than living in harmony. The transmutation from "white" to "charred black" suggests the loss of innocence and a kind of awakening. This eco-mythic poem dismantles the superiority of human over the natural world and proposes the axiom that if humans act with disproportionate pride, the consequence is precariously reversed. Hughes redefines the crow not as "other" but a reflection of human desire or violent impulses. The crow's conversion from innocence to darkness functions as a myth of origins and a critique of human arrogance.

In conclusion, Hughes's poetry is a complex amalgamation of violence, aggression and mythopoeia that dismantles the conventional anthropocentric notion when examined through the lens of ecocriticism. His mythic narratives even collapse the traditional relationship between humans

and natural environment, offering a biocentric or symbiotic relationship. His poetic imagination discloses nature not only as raw, primal and instinctual but also reveals a deep ecological truth, where brutality, violence, aggression and myth converge together to shape our understanding of the natural world. By rejecting the romantic vibe of nature, Hughes's works urge readers to confront ecological truth and reassess human's little role in a broader hemisphere.

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