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Exploring eco-centric poetry of ted Hughes: Nature, humanity and environmental consciousness

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Abstract

Ted Hughes, the renowned English poet, was known for his eco-centric poetry that explored themes of nature, humanity, and environmental consciousness. He often portrayed the world of nature as a powerful, elemental force, highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. His poems often explore the wildness, beauty, and sometimes brutality of nature, emphasizing the need for humans to respect and coexist harmoniously with the natural world. This approach reflects his ecological consciousness and the idea that nature holds intrinsic value beyond its utility to humans. His works vividly depicted the natural world presenting a unique perspective that centered on the external aspect of nature and the interactions between humans and their surroundings. In a sense, his poetry can be regarded as a return to territory, hostility, fierceness, cruel behaviours of animals such as foxes, hawks, horses, jaguars, and crows. It 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. The present paper focusses on the eco-centric themes and the environmental consciousness in the poetry of Ted Hughes. A deep analysis of his poetry has been made to explore Hughes's portrayal of nature, wildlife and the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, eco-centric, consciousness, interconnectedness, dominance, entity, animalistic

Introductions

Every poet has a public responsibility to deal with the most disturbing problems of the times he is living in. Ted Hughes was also aware of this responsibility and he highlighted the contemporary issues in his poems. 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. Ecocentrism in the poetry of Ted Hughes refers to his focus on nature and the environment as central themes.

Kate Dunning (2013) ^[6] argues that eco-poetry 'has consciously been influenced by sensitivity to ecological thinking, especially in the area of energy flow/retention, cyclical renewal, bioregionalism, and the interdependency of all organisms with an ecosystem.' Ted Hughes had keen observations of the natural world and its inherent beauty and that served as a reminder of the significance of environmental consciousness and its need to protect and preserve the planet for future generations. His poems like 'The Thought Fox' and 'Wind' often incorporate the elements of the environment, reflecting his concern for the human activity on the planet. There is always a firm focus on the delicate balance that exists or must exist between humanity and the environment.

In Hughes's poetry, nature is portrayed as an independent entity, possessing its own agency and power. The poetry of Ted Hughes emphasizes that the world of nature is indifferent to human affairs. The world of nature operates on its own terms, oblivious to the concerns of human world. The portrayal of nature in its raw unadulterated form can be both humbling and unsettling. It can evoke the feelings of awe, fear, or wonder, prompting readers to ponder the vastness and diversity of life beyond the human experience. At the same time, it reminds us of our place within the larger ecosystem and the fleeting nature of human existence.

The eco-centric poetry of Hughes presents a thought-provoking exploration of the interconnectedness of nature, humanity, and environmental consciousness, encouraging human-beings to re-evaluate their roles as the stewards of the Earth. Here's an excerpt from his poem "Pike", which exemplifies his eco-centric approach.

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All of it flesh, bones, and flower-bright eye
 Grew older. It was as if it had become
 A ball of flame in the skull, an
 Incandescent
 And inextinguishable coal
 That could not be smothered.”

Through his poetry, Hughes delved deep into the relationship between nature, humanity, and environmental consciousness. Fletcher (2004: 4) ^[14] claims that owing to participating in nature, poetry expresses the relation between nature and humanity. The poetry of Ted Hughes weaves a complex tapestry of man-animal connections, ranging from the symbolic to the instinctual and from the savage to the mystical. He often used animals as symbols to reflect human experiences and emotions, frequently highlighted the raw, primal instincts of both animals and humans, blurring the boundaries between the civilized human world and the untamed world of wilderness. This portrayal often underscores the animalistic tendencies within humans and the inherent wildness present in nature, emphasizing that despite societal structures, humans are still a part of the world of nature. In ‘Hawk Roosting’ the indestructible connection indicates “the presence of nature within humans” (Lidström, 2015: 150) ^[5].

His works, more often than not, celebrated the power and beauty of the natural world. Not only the brighter aspects but the darker aspects of human-nature relationship are also highlighted by Ted Hughes in his poetry. The brutal and violent side of nature has been truthfully depicted. The reader can see the predator-prey relationship, the hunting scenes, or confrontations that reveal the harsh realities of existence in the natural world that reminds the readers of the constant struggle for survival in the wild world. In many of his poems the animals have been depicted as copying human behavior in ways more than one.

Ted Hughes used anthropomorphism in a very efficient way. Human-like qualities and attributes are given to the animals. The poems typically highlight many similarities between human beings and the world of nature. Hughes masterfully portrayed the power, beauty and unpredictability of nature while highlighting humanity’s place within it. His eco-centric approach often emphasized the raw and primal aspects of the natural world, creating vivid imagery that draws readers into a deeper understanding of the environment. Hasan (2012: 177) ^[4] states that Hughes was a witness to the unavoidable consequence of terrors, murders on mass scale, and viciousness of Second World War. Tragedy and devastation of the war has been finely depicted through animal imagery in the poems of Hughes. 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) ^[9]. Hence, hawk is a symbol for human callousness. In the poem Hawk Roosting, the hawk has been portrayed as a cruel dictator who tears heads ruthlessly to assert its dominance over other creatures of the wild. For hawk killing other creatures is a matter of survival. It kills in order to survive: “My manners are tearing off heads – The allotment of death.” There is a similarity between the nature of hawk and the human nature as both has been presented as callous, unchangeable, and both have the potential to damage and destruction (Bandyopadhyay, 2013: 2) ^[11].

Hughes was deeply connected with the world of nature and often explored the complex relationship of human-beings with the natural world, particularly animals. The poetry of Hughes, frequently depicted the animals, landscape and elements of nature and revealed many aspects hitherto unexplored. His poems ‘The Hawk and the Rain’ and ‘Pike’ etc. showcased the wild, raw, untamed essence of nature and its primal forces. Analysing Hughes’s war-poetry, Meyers finds a connection between animals and soldiers that both kill their own kind with fierce primitivism (2013: 32) ^[15].

Hughes used animals as symbols metaphors, and allegorical representations to explore themes such as power, brutality, innocence, violence etc. In his poetry, he highlights the raw and uncontrollable aspects of the world of nature. Ted Hughes has twenty-eight animal poems which present his indirect attempt to describe the animal identity in human beings. In many of these poems, he glorified the instinctive, impulsive nature of vulnerable and sometimes exotic animals. He glorified the animal view of the surroundings (Naeem, 2010) ^[16]. Ted Hughes, in some of his poems, represent animals as an entity that is distinctly different from humans that shows the otherness and mystery of the animal kingdom. In the poetry of Ted Hughes, the animals have often been used as symbols and archetypes representing certain qualities or aspects of human nature. For instance, the fox, the crow, jaguar, hawk, and other such creatures often display various characteristics common with human beings. Such characteristics include power, cunningness, cruelty etc. These creatures, in a way, reflect human emotions and behavior and enable the readers to explore their own nature through the lens of the animal kingdom.

Ted Hughes did not turn a blind eye towards the destructive side of human behavior that affects the environ adversely. He addressed that aspect of human behavior in many of his poems, like ‘The Thought Fox’ and ‘Wind, he hinted at the threat posed by the inconsiderate action on the ecological balance. Many readers went on to say that this glorification of animal life is a kind of satire to the rigid and chained life of human beings. Human beings have to camouflage their basic instincts (Freud, 1923) ^[8] as those are sometimes considered to be inherent flaws and weaknesses, demeaning their worth as the nature’s best creations but such is not the case with the animals. Animals are free to be the slaves of their instincts unlike the superior creations, who are not allowed to respond to their inner calls and are restrained by the social restraints. These vicious animals of Ted Hughes are more humans than animals. Scigaj (2000) ^[13]. The poet’s biocentrism as seen in the animal-human relationship (Moortown Diary) is an example of co-operation, care, and stewardship in rearing livestock under the food-chain.

The animals not only display savage aspects, they act as guide and teachers for the human beings in ways more than one. By observing and learning from animals, humans can gain insights into themselves and they can know about the world of wild nature. This shows that animals have an instinctual as well as natural and ancient wisdom which can greatly benefit the human beings. Hughes explores the theme of loss and grief through the lens of animals. The death of animals or their loss of natural habitat can symbolize larger ecological concerns or reflect on the impermanence and vulnerability of all living beings.

Conclusion

Overall, the poetry of Ted Hughes reflects an eco-centric worldview that emphasizes the importance of nature in its own right, rather than just as a resource for human use. Through his poetry, Ted Hughes encourages his readers to recognize their place in the cosmic system, within the larger natural order, thereby promoting environmental consciousness and an appreciation for the intricacies of the world around us. His eco-centric approach to poetry continues to inspire and provoke thought about our relationship with nature even today. His exploration of the nature and its relationship with humanity continues to resonate with readers, encouraging contemplation of our place within the natural world and the intrinsic connections we share with the animal kingdom.

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