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## **Of Earthly Forms and Unmooring of Self: A Posthumanist Reimagining of Ted Hughes' poetry**

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**Abstract:** The paper explores Ted Hughes' posthumanistic approach, revealing his profound fascination with animals and the natural world. Most of Ted Hughes' predecessors, and even his coevals sought to exalt human beings as the master of all earthly forms, esteeming them as the rational creatures, inherently superior to all other forms of existence. Unlike them, many modern thinkers and writers such as Arne Naess, Rachel Carson, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, W.S. Merwin, Gary Snyder etc eschewed the prevailing preoccupations with artificial life, human dilemmas, and psychological emptiness that dominated much of contemporary literature. Instead, they elevated the theme of earthly forms, illuminating the profound interconnection and interdependence between humanity and the natural world. As an ecologist in spirit and vision, Ted Hughes reveals in his poetry a profound metamorphosis in his perception - from an anthropocentric worldview, which exalts humanity as the axis of existence, toward a biocentric sensibility that honors the intrinsic value of all living beings. His poetry explores this intricate relationship, portraying nature not as separate, but as fundamentally linked to human life. Through close examination of his work, this paper seeks to highlight Hughes' movement toward a more humanitarian and ecologically attuned sensibility, in which humanity is but one thread in the vast, interwoven tapestry of life.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, anthropocentric, biocentric, ecologist interconnection, interdependence.

### **Introduction**

Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural movement that delineates the delicate intersection between humans and non-humans. It is an inclusive approach in literary studies, enunciating the intricate web of interconnection of all forms of life. At the heart of posthumanism lies a critique of the traditional hierarchical structure embodied in the Great Chain of Being, where human beings stood at the pinnacle, distinct and separate from all other forms of existence. Posthumanism, in contrast, decentres the centrality of



human beings and unmoors their self by celebrating the interconnectivity and interdependence of all living organisms within the ecosystem. Here, all living species share rhythms and mutual consensus, and therefore, the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, become porous, fluid, and negotiable. Posthumanist thinkers lay emphasis on a counter-reading, one that dismantles the myth of human supremacy and reimagines the human not as a pinnacle of earthly creatures, but as a thread intricately woven into the vast, teeming tapestry of life. Posthumanism “does not see the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life.” (Nayar 14)

Posthumanism illuminates the cyclical cadence of history, a spiraling odyssey that departs from the elemental intimacy of nature, passes through the structured confines of civic order, and ultimately circles back to the untamed, regenerative womb of the natural world. Ere the dawn of structured human civilization, humanity existed in harmonious accord with nature and its creatures. During that era, human life thrived in a web of mutual interdependence, and even feared and worshipped mother nature. Yet, with the ascent of scientific advancement and the mechanized march of the Industrial Revolution, this ancient bond was irrevocably severed. In his letter to Merchant, Ted Hughes enunciated the loss of resonance between human and nature and lamented mankind’s long forsaken of divine bliss, a loss echoing through ages. “The animals, who were created exactly as they are by this Creation, and have never been detached from it, are therefore in a state of ‘bliss’—they live a divine life in a divine world. They live in perpetual ‘Samadhi’, and have never fallen from it into ego-consciousness, into the acculturating, detached cerebration which removes us from it—separates us from the ‘bliss’ of our animal/spiritual being, & from the ‘divine’ world in which we ought to be living” (*Letters* 580). In the present age of rat race, artificiality, and emotional wasteland, man seeks to apply a soothing ointment to the scur that afflicts the earth by the balm of care and compassion and by rekindle the fading embers of hope, virtue and verisimilitude amidst the quiet majesty of nature.

Various Western philosophical thoughts starting from Descartes’ rationalism to Aristotle’s anthropocentrism, Christian theology’s Imago Dei, Renaissance Humanism, Kant’s moral autonomy, and Spencer’s Social Darwinism, the dominion of humankind over nature and its creatures has been upheld by privileging reason, intellect, moral sensibility, and a supposed divine ordination that elevates the human above



all life forms. Awakened to the hollowness of humanism, certain writers, unmoored from the confines of anthropocentric thought, turned their gaze once more to the vast and eloquent cosmos of the natural world. Ted Hughes, a post-holocaust voice forged in the shadow of war's desolation and the scars it etched upon both life and land, turns his poetic vision toward the wounded earth. Bearing witness to the devastation wrought upon nature and its myriad creatures, he selects his subject the urgent tremor of environmental crisis. Within his verse unfolds a testament to the ancient, elemental bond between humankind and the natural world.

### **Decentralization of Human**

Posthumanism challenges human-centered orientation embraced by humanism and explores the idea that humans are not the pinnacle of existence or the most important beings in the universe, but one organism among myriad of organisms. By decentering humanity, posthumanism challenges the idea that humans are inherently superior to other forms of life. In Hughes's poetry, animals emerge as emblems of strength, elemental vitality, and an indomitable fervor for existence. He exalts their swiftness, single-mindedness, and unwavering self-reliance with reverent admiration. "For him, they have substantiality, a realness about them that conveys qualities of security, stability and permanence that the human beings simply do not have. People wobble in and out of existence, waver between being and non being; animals do not" (Kundu 53).

In his inaugural poetic collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, Hughes displaces humankind from its pedestal, portraying it as fragile and faltering against the primal, unyielding vitality of the animal world. The titular poem of *The Hawk in the Rain* explores the intricate entanglement of man, animal, nature, and the very fabric of existence. It conjures a harrowing image of the speaker, struggling and flailing against the boundless tide of time and mortality. Amid the storm's fury and elemental violence, he experiences his own frailty, a fleeting presence borne helplessly upon life's unyielding current.

and I,

Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting  
Morsel in the earth's mouth, strain towards the master-  
Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still. (19)

Here, Hughes dismantles the illusion of human supremacy, casting the hawk as a creature elevated above mankind for its invincibility and unshakable composure. The cold, ceaseless, cruel, and lacerating wind passes over the hawk without harm, while it scours the speaker to his core, rending the very fibers of his fragile form. Where the speaker shivers and falters beneath the weight of elemental wrath, the hawk stands aloof and impervious, its gaze unwavering, its stillness a defiance of the chaos around it. In this stark juxtaposition, the hawk becomes a symbol of stoic endurance and primal authority, while the speaker, trembling and volatile, is cast as a creature drawn helplessly into the hawk's shadowy orbit, where fear and awe fuse into a vision of his own insignificance.

A similar vision unfolds in *Hawk Roosting*, where Hughes once again subverts the anthropocentric mythos, upholding man at the centre of all creation, and that all else exists merely to serve him. Here, it is the hawk that ascends to the throne of supremacy, enthroned as the axis of existence itself. "It assumes that it is the exact centre, the sole purpose and acme of creation. Everything that is not hawk was created for the benefit of hawk" (Sagar 84). With sovereign authority and divine entitlement, the hawk stands not as a creature among many, but as the very fulcrum of creation, a creature whose dominion unquestioned, and purpose unchallenged. Through this bold reimagining, Hughes crowns the animal, not man, as the master of all things.

It took the whole creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot (69)

In *Thrushes*, Hughes probes the stark polarity between primal ferocity and mechanical precision, setting the bird's instinctive violence against the languor of human will. The thrush, small yet lethal, navigates the world with ruthless efficiency. Its movements are sharp and decisive, a "bounce, a stab" that leaves no room for doubt or delay as it seizes its prey hidden in the grass. This unerring, automatic drive stands in jarring contrast to the human condition, marked by hesitation and inertia. Human actions are bogged down by "indolent procrastinations," punctuated by yawns, sighs, and idle "head-scratchings." While the bird embodies pure, unreflective purpose, humanity is burdened by thought, weighed down by its own self-consciousness.

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares.  
No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab



### And a ravening second. (82)

In the poem *Wind*, human beings are portrayed as fragile and feeble before the formidable and unyielding force of nature. The wind emerges not merely as a physical phenomenon, but as a symbol of nature's indomitable will. The poem evokes an image of mankind as a trembling leaf, tossed and torn in the face of a power far beyond its control, revealing the sheer vulnerability of the human condition when confronted with the wrath of the natural world. The inmates of the house, struck with awe and dread, are paralyzed by the savage onslaught of the wind. They sit motionless, beside the roaring fire, utterly still, as though frozen in place. The fierce storm stirs an overwhelming fear within them, stripping them of all impulse or desire to act, even the simple task of reading a book becomes impossible. The very walls and foundations of the house seem to quiver under the storm's wrath. Time stretches on, and they remain trapped in the same unnerving stillness, as the wind howls and the windows tremble, threatening to shatter. Beneath the distant horizon, they hear the haunting wail of stones, as if the earth itself is crying out in anguish.

### **Animal and Non-Human Perspectives**

Departing from a human-centered perspective, Hughes reoriented his poetic universe around the lives of animals, a world unclouded by anthropocentrism. Recognizing that animals possess their own sensibilities, instincts and perceptions beyond human grasp, Hughes unearths the unheard world in his verses. In his poetry, animals do not merely appear but they speak, feel, and act with a fierce interiority, their presence rendered with an intensity that honours their otherness. His poetic realm explores a vivid pantheon of creatures: hawks and jaguars, foxes and crows, otters, pike, thrushes, swifts, cows, ewes, horses, tomcats, wolves, and others. Each of these animals possesses a unique existence, imbued with its own significance and purpose. "Hughes's poetry emphasised the pitiless and violent forces of nature. Many of his poems focus on animals who pursue their lives with a single-minded strength and power. Some of the animals he depicts are not so much violent as vigorous, with a sharp sense of survival. Hughes makes his readers aware of the prehistory of the natural world, stressing its indifference to man" (Carter 442). Many of his poems are adorned with the names of animals, their titles echoing the untamed rhythms of the natural world - *Hawk Roosting*, *The Thought-Fox*, *The Jaguar*, *Pike*, *Thrushes*, *The Bull Moses*, *Wodwo*, *Fox Hunt*, *Crow's First Lesson*, *The Otter*, *The Hawk in*



*the Rain*, and others. Each title stands like a totem, conjuring the fierce spirit or elusive mystery of the creature it names, revealing the poet's deep, almost mythic entanglement with the animal.

### **Environment and Ethical Concerns**

Hughes strives to illuminate the deep and inextricable relationship that threads through all living beings. He seeks to highlight the profound ethical truths that arise from the intricate web of interconnectedness and mutual dependence that unites the human and the non-human world. His keen awareness of human culture finds a mirror in his reverence for the earth's flora and fauna, for the rivers, stones, and winds that shape the outer world as much as they echo the inner. Through his eco-poetry, Hughes conjures a vision in which culture and nature are not opposing forces, but entwined realities, each sustaining and shaping the other. At the heart of this vision lies his urgent concern for the fate of animals and a resolute belief in the delicate reciprocity that binds all life. His enduring fascination with the wild, its creatures, its rhythms, its elemental truths forms the very foundation of his poetic imagination.

The intricate interconnectedness and interdependence between humanity and nature finds lyrical expression in *Moortown Diary*. In this collection, Hughes draws deeply from his lived experience as a farmer in North Devon, offering a raw, reverent account of the fragile yet vital communion that binds human life to the rhythms of the natural world. Here, the farmer emerges not merely as a labourer of the soil, but as a custodian, entrusted with the care of the land and the lives that dwell upon it. The communion that exists between the farmer and the animals is neither sentimental nor exploitative; it is elemental, born of necessity and nurtured through mutual dependence. The animals are not projected as mere commodities, but as beings whose survival is intricately tied to the diligence and compassion of their keeper. In turn, the farmer's own well-being, his livelihood, his spiritual grounding, is sustained by the health of the land and the vitality of his animals. Through this intimate portrayal, Hughes renders a world in which the flourishing of one life is inextricable from the flourishing of all, and where stewardship becomes not a burden, but a sacred obligation. In these poems, the farmer's humanity emerges with striking clarity and quiet grace. He moves among his animals not as a distant overseer, but as a tender guardian, offering care with the gentle attentiveness one might reserve for a child. In moments of need, he is there, guiding newborn lambs to their mothers' teats, shielding shivering ewes from the bitter bite of winter, or coaxing life back into ailing calves with medicine pressed between



clenched jaws. The communion between man and animal in Hughes's poetry is not one of dominion, but of reciprocity, each life depending on the other. Through this tender choreography of care, Hughes crafts a poetic landscape where nurture is sacred and the bond between human and animal is both intimate and essential.

"Struggle" powerfully captures the profound anguish of a mother cow in the throes of labor, her pain and effort rendered with raw intensity. In this moment of primal exertion, the poet's role as a compassionate witness and helper is vividly illuminated. He assists in the birth, offering not only his physical presence but his nurturing care, feeding the newly arrived calf with hay and drink, tending to it with the same tender attention he would a fragile life. Through his efforts, the calf begins its slow journey to recovery, its frail body finding strength after the brutal ordeal of birth.

We gave her a drink, we gave her hay. The calf  
Started his convalescence  
From the gruelling journey. (509)

The most harrowing and visceral poem in this sequence is *February 17th*, unfolding a chilling and unforgettable scene of a lamb's birth, where suffering and compassion collide in the most intense of circumstances. The poet's profound sympathy for the ewe in distress permeates every line, as he desperately exhausts every possible means to ensure the safe arrival of the lamb. Yet, when his efforts fail and the situation grows dire, he is compelled to take a drastic, unsettling action, one that might seem cruel in its extremity. In this moment of desperation, he resorts to violence not out of malice, but from a deep, agonizing drive to protect the mother. The cruelty he inflicts is, paradoxically, a form of kindness, an act of mercy in the belief that only through such harsh measures can both the ewe and the lamb be saved. The poet, in his anguish, becomes the embodiment of a painful truth, that sometimes, to save life, one must endure the cruelty of necessity.

I went Two miles for the injection and a razor.  
Sliced the lamb's throat-strings, levered with a knife  
Between the vertebrae and brought the head off  
To stare at its mother, its pipe sitting in the mud  
With all earth for a body. Then pushed



The neck-stump right back in, and as I pushed  
She pushed. She pushed crying and I pushed gasping. (519)

This poem reflects the profound interconnectedness and interdependence between man and animal, capturing the delicate balance of care and necessity. The farmer assumes the role of both steward and healer, while the sheep becomes a patient in need of intervention. In this moment of crisis, the poet steps into the role of a nurse, offering not only physical aid but also emotional tenderness, as he saves the life of the ewe. Through these acts of compassion and cruelty, the poem highlights the intricate connection between nature and culture, where the survival of one depends on the sacrifice and care of the other.

### **Fluidity of Identity**

Posthumanism challenges the notion of binary opposition and the fixed or essential identities, embracing instead a more fluid, hybrid conception of the self, one that slips beyond the confines of rigid categorization. In this vision, the boundary between the human and the non-human becomes very porous and fragile. Ted Hughes, too, evokes this porous and shifting identity that emerge when man and nature are no longer placed under the purview of binary opposition.

In every poem, animals assert their own identity and existence with a quiet, unshakable certainty. In contrast, humanity has often found itself cast in a state of vulnerability and awe when confronted by the animal world. The traits that define animals such as 'determined,' 'consistent,' 'single-minded,' and 'inflexible', stand in stark opposition to the often shifting, fragile nature of human identity. The fluidity of identity finds its visceral presence in *Hawk in the Rain*, where the self is not fixed but displaced and permuted. Human identity, in this poetic landscape, becomes a malleable force, shaped by elemental forces. While animals remain steadfast in their essence, man has grappled with an unstable sense of self, caught in the ebb and flow of doubt and change. Man, deprived of the primal energy that ensures the identity of natural elements, has faltered in his quest to ensure a stable sense of identity and existence, rendering him inferior to the natural world. In this poem, the universal notion of order and the very notion of logos get deconstructed, as the boundaries between man and nature dissolve, revealing a more egalitarian vision of existence.

The same image of fluidity of identity and displacement of universal order finds striking expression in *Wodwo*, where the imagery draws heavily from primitive rituals and mythical creatures, conjuring a world



where the boundaries of reality and imagination blur. The poem delves into the heart of a profound existential inquiry, probing the nature of man's identity and place in the world. The title poem, *Wodwo* opens with the poignant question, "What am I?" - a direct confrontation with the existential dilemma of the wodwo, casting an unsettling light on the complexities of self and being.

What am I?

...

Do these weeds

Know me and name me to each other have they

Seen me before, do I fit in their world? (183)

Human identity, once enshrined as master of all creatures, sovereign and unbound upon the earth, is starkly reimagined in *Hill-Stone Was Content*, where humanity appears not as ruler but as prisoner, caged within the cold, unyielding machinery of industrialization. The poem inverts the natural order, portraying humans as creatures estranged from their elemental essence, subdued by the lifeless rhythms of a mechanized world. In attributing the qualities of a stone to humanity, Hughes critiques the dehumanizing condition of mill workers, reduced to mere cogs in the vast machinery of progress. Technology transforms human beings into living objects, their autonomy lost as they are forced into mechanical rhythms, no longer creatures who work freely in tune with their instincts, but rather, caged, their spirits confined within the rigid boundaries of their labor. In this mechanized existence, they become like four-cornered animals, deprived of the liberty to live fully as human.

And they too became four-cornered, stony

In their long, darkening, dwindling stand

Against the guerrilla patience

Of the soft hill-water. (463)

## Conclusion

Departing from the humanist tradition that crowns man as the apex of creation, Ted Hughes's poetic vision unfolds within a world woven from threads of interconnectedness and profound interdependence. Rather than exalting human supremacy, his verse reveals a cosmos where all forms of life are intricately



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woven into the vast, teeming tapestry of life, in which humanity is but one thread. His poetic world centres around the life of animals and natural world that ensures his transformative poetic journey from an anthropocentric to a biocentric worldview. In his poems, the human voice is gradually decentered, giving way to the fierce, unfiltered presence of the non-human, through which he reimagines existence as a shared, primal inheritance. By portraying nature not as a backdrop to human drama but as an equal participant in the cycle of existence, Hughes presents a compelling ecological consciousness. Through this lens, Hughes' poetry serves not only as artistic expression but also as ecological insight, urging a respectful and balanced relationship with the natural world. This exploration of Hughes' work reveals a poet increasingly attuned to the rhythms of the earth, offering a vital literary response to environmental concerns that remain profoundly relevant today.

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