

## A Critical Examination of Thirty-Nine Selected Poems by Ted Hughes

### 1. THE HAWK IN THE RAIN

(From the volume of poems entitled "The Hawk in the Rain")

#### Summary

The speaker in the poem says that he is walking laboriously on the ground because there is deep mud through which he has to drag himself when it is also raining heavily. While he is going through a real ordeal thus dragging himself through the mud in the heavy rain, a hawk, perched at a height, looks downwards calmly and without showing any sign of discomfort. The hawk sits "effortlessly" at a high point, maintaining his equilibrium. The hawk's wings seem to hold all Creation without having to exert themselves in the least. The hawk sits steadily without being in the least shaken by the strong and cold wind which strikes against the body of the speaker in the poem, hitting every organ of his body. Indeed, the speaker in the poem feels that the rain is cutting through his head and reaching his very bones, while the hawk sits determinedly, thus displaying unshakable will-power. The speaker feels that he would be swallowed by the mud on the earth. He is acutely conscious of the violence of Nature at this time, while the hawk sits still and at ease. But then it occurs to the speaker that a day would come when this hawk, taking a wrong direction in the course of a furious storm, would be forced downwards and flung down to the earth, to be killed instantaneously. Then the hawk's blood would mingle with the mud on the ground.

#### Critical Appreciation: One of Hughes's Most Famous Poems

*The Hawk in the Rain* is one of Hughes's most famous poems. The whole volume of poems, Hughes's first publication (which appeared in 1957), was called "The Hawk in the Rain" after the title of this one poem.

#### The Steadiness of the Hawk Versus the Unsteadiness of Man

The theme of this poem is the contrast between the steadiness, the stability, and the strength of a hawk (perched on some cliff or crag or rock

or tree) and the unsteadiness and the sense of danger of a human being when it is raining heavily and when a strong, cold wind is also blowing. The hawk sits effortlessly at a height and has a still\* eye. In other words, the hawk remains unperturbed by the heavy rain and the strong wind, and maintains his equilibrium and poise. But the man struggles through the mud on the ground, feeling afraid lest he should sink into it and be swallowed by the earth. The hawk shows his strong will against the rain and against the violence of the wind, while the man feels that his end is near. However, the last stanza expresses a different idea. The hawk would one day meet his end when, "coming the wrong way," he might be hurled downwards by the fury of the storm and be killed. While the poem shows the hawk's superiority over man in terms of will-power and the power of endurance, it also shows that the hawk is not immortal or invulnerable.

#### Graphic Imagery in the Poem

The poem contains graphic imagery, like the bulk of poems in the same volume, and like most of the other poems which Hughes wrote subsequently. We are given a vivid picture of a man struggling through mud and feeling that he might be swallowed by the earth. We also have a vivid picture of the hawk perched effortlessly at a height, maintaining a still eye. The final stanza presents the most vivid picture of the hawk being hurled down by a furious storm, and dashing against the earth, to be killed instantaneously.

#### Striking Words Put Together in Original Combinations

The pictures in this poem have been presented to our minds by means of striking words put together in original combinations. Indeed, this poem shows Hughes's skilful use of the language even though simplicity is sacrificed in the process. Some of the most impressive lines, as regards the use of language, are the following:

While banging wind kills these stubborn hedges,  
Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart,  
And rain hacks my head to the bone, the hawk hangs  
The diamond point of will that polestars  
The sea drowner's endurance:

#### The Use of Simile, Metaphor, and Alliteration; Also a Dramatic Effect

The use of simile and metaphor in the poem adds to its interest and also serves to emphasize the particular idea being expressed. Examples of such a use of the figures of speech are: "steady as a hallucination"; "morsel in the earth's mouth"; "the ponderous shires crash on him"; and "the horizon traps him." We also have alliteration in the poem; and this also is a device

\* Still—calm; peaceful; without any trace of fear or agitation.

which Hughes uses in his poetry frequently and with great effect. The very first line and then the last line of the poem provide examples of the use of alliteration:

(1) I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up ...  
Here the "d" sound occurs thrice.

(2) Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land.

Here the "m" sound is repeated, and also the "r" sound (in "blood" and "land"). The last stanza produces a dramatic effect on us because of the reversal of the idea of the poem. This stanza comes as a surprise. Throughout the poem a contrast is established between the man and the hawk; and then in the last stanza we are told that the hawk would one day meet a fate similar to the man's, if not worse than the man's.

### Some Comments By the Critics

According to one\* of the critics, Hughes believes that the strength of animals lies in their instinct and precise function. Hughes said: "Animals are not violent, they are so much more completely controlled than men, so much more adapted to their environment." So, while Hughes is almost swallowed up by mud, and is mastered by this earthy element, the hawk "effortlessly at height hangs his still eye." While the ferocious wind

Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart,  
And rain hacks my head to the bone, the hawk hangs  
The diamond point of will that polestars  
The sea drowner's endurance.

This, says our critic, is a radical note in Nature-poetry. Previous lovers of Nature have, like G.M. Hopkins, marvelled at the variety and beauty of animals, or, like D.H. Lawrence, seen them as similar to man. Hughes, however, deliberately puts man at a disadvantage as compared with animals. In this poem, man exists on a lower earth-bound level than the hawk. For Hughes, animals are pure embodied function; they are not, like man, vitiated by spurious morality or incapacitated by doubt. A hawk is a hawk whereas a man has ambitions to be God-like and is thus permanently frustrated. The hawk is for ever in his own element even when he dies an elemental death as he "meets the weather/Coming the wrong way." Another critic\*\* expresses the view that *The Hawk in the Rain* illustrates Hughes's penetrating power and energy. This critic also says that Hughes's admiration for, and kinship with, the primitive and barbaric world of animals too find an expression in this poem. Yet another critic† is of the

opinion that Hughes in this poem enters imaginatively into the hawk's victory, as it rides "effortlessly at height" above the storm, but that here Hughes remains conscious also of the "habit of the dogged grave" which keeps him earth-bound, and which in the end will smash the bird, too—though in the hawk's "own time", a choice which enables the bird to submit to its fate, and so snatch a martyr's triumph even in destruction

maybe in his own time meets the weather  
Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,  
Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,  
The horizon trap him; the round angelic eye  
Smashed, mix his heart's blood with mire of the land.

In this poem, says the same critic (A.E. Dyson), the striving towards the "master-Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still" is balanced by awareness of time: the hawk's holding of "all creation in a weightless quiet" is "steady as a hallucination", and the word "hallucination" pinpoints the ambivalence which a human intelligence cannot help feeling about the reality of such moments.

### Some More Comments on the Poem

Another critic\* says that the poem *The Hawk in the Rain* carries echoes of G.M. Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, and that it places the speaker in the poem—a man slogging through the clinging mud in heavy rain—in a curiously independent polar relationship with a hawk in the distant sky. The speaker "strains towards the master-/Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still"; yet the hawk may one day view the earth from a victim's standpoint and feel "the ponderous shires crash on him." The poem, says this critic, attempts too much, but reflects better than any other in the volume the obsession of the poet with one aspect of Nature—the power and the gift of animals to make the kill, and behind that the unyielding force of being itself which is so indifferent to suffering and weakness. The symbolic application to man is fairly clear. Hughes picks up cues from D.H. Lawrence and Dylan Thomas, including the latter writer's artistic creed: "Man be my metaphor". More than either of these two writers, Hughes carries those cues to unsentimental limits in his best poems. Another critic\*\* says that *The Hawk in the Rain*, which is one of Hughes's major poems, seems to have been produced with extreme artistic intensity, while another critic† says that this poem reminds us of the fact that, in some tribes, just to dream of an eagle is to be identified as a shaman‡, and that it

\* M.L. Rosenthal.

\*\* Keith Cushman.

† Michael Sweeting.

‡ *Shaman*—a man believed to be capable of making prophecies in a state of ecstasy or frenzy.

\* Alan Bold.

\*\* Geoffrey Thurley.

is certainly one of the best poems in the volume in which it figures. Yet another critic\* points out that the narrator in this poem is overawed by the enormity of the risk which the birds take in committing themselves fully to the fury of the elements, and miraculously surviving. Two other critics† have expressed the view that in his first volume of poems Hughes attempts to create poetry with a material body by employing language which, when spoken, demands a conscious physical effort, dense with guttural consonants, and with alliteration and assonance. The opening lines of the poem *The Hawk in the Rain*, according to these critics, are an example of this technique. Here are the opening lines:

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up  
 Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,  
 From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle  
 With the habit of the dogged grave.....

This passage is melodramatically exaggerated, and it also illustrates the dangers of an extreme reliance on the obvious physical properties of words. The language in this passage is so dense that one becomes intensely conscious of the words as words, and of the effort of the poet in putting them together. In this particular case, however, the result is felicitous: the clogged and desperate verbal devices give a striking expression to the protagonist's floundering earth-boundedness. But we see by contrast real mastery and subtlety in the immediately following description of the hawk: the hawk "effortlessly at height hangs his still eye." This example shows the speed and the directness of effect which Hughes can achieve by putting words together. These critics also tell us that in some of Hughes's poems, such as *The Hawk in the Rain*, Hughes can effectively describe a moment of stillness, or a moment of observed stillness. The following lines in this poem illustrate the point:

His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,  
 Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.

(Such stillness as the subject of poetry is also to be found in *Pike*, *The Bull Moses*, and *The Casualty*). These critics point out further that the alliterative piling up of verbs in the opening stanza of the poem *The Hawk in the Rain* suggests an agitation in the poet as well as in the protagonist. In this impressive poem, according to them, we can see Hughes's imagination operating in what later on became its most characteristic way.

\* Michael Parker.

† Gifford and Roberts.