



Ecocritical Perspectives on Nature and Human Relationships in Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders the relationship between human beings and the more-than-human world in selected poems by Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. The argument develops from a comparative reading of *Crow*, “Hawk Roosting,” “Pike,” “The Thought-Fox,” and “Jaguar” by Hughes and *Death of a Naturalist*, “Digging,” “Bogland,” “Blackberry-Picking,” and “Personal Helicon” by Heaney. Rather than treating the natural world as a decorative setting, the study examines how animals, soil, water, cultivation, seasonal processes, and remembered places participate in the construction of meaning. Hughes is approached through questions of animal agency, instinct, territory, predation, and survival; Heaney is examined through place, labour, memory, inheritance, and cultural belonging. The comparison shows that their ecological imaginations are different but mutually illuminating.

Hughes unsettles human authority by making animal consciousness difficult to contain within familiar human categories. Heaney, by contrast, shows how deeply human identity is formed through material contact with particular landscapes. Ecocritical concepts associated with Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, and related scholars provide the critical vocabulary for the discussion. The paper argues that the two poets together complicate anthropocentrism and invite a more relational understanding of environmental life. Their poetry is therefore valuable not simply because it contains images of nature, but because it asks readers to reconsider where human life begins and ends in relation to the living world.

KEYWORDS: Ted Hughes; Seamus Heaney; ecocriticism; animal agency; landscape; place; memory; ecological interdependence; environmental ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary representations of nature often reveal more than an author's attitude toward scenery. They can disclose ideas about power, belonging, knowledge, labour, and the boundaries separating human life from other forms of existence. This makes poetry particularly useful for ecological inquiry. A poem may place a bird, a field, a river, a bog, or a cultivated patch of earth at the centre of attention and, in doing so, disturb the assumption that the human observer is the unquestioned centre of meaning. The environmental problems of the present age make such questions more urgent, but they also demonstrate that ecological thinking is not restricted to scientific or policy discussions. Literature can shape the imaginative habits through which people perceive their surroundings.

Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney offer two especially productive cases for such a comparison. Both poets write with sustained attention to the material world, yet their emphases differ. Hughes repeatedly enters animal environments and explores energies associated with hunting, fear, territory, movement, and endurance. His creatures are rarely passive objects waiting for human interpretation. Heaney's poetry more often begins with recognisable places and activities: digging soil, gathering fruit, looking into water, remembering agricultural work, or encountering landscapes marked by history. In his work, environmental experience becomes inseparable from family memory, cultural inheritance, and the formation of self.

The present paper builds on the comparative direction of the underlying thesis while substantially recasting its prose and argumentative structure. Its purpose is not to claim that Hughes and Heaney share an identical environmental philosophy. Instead, it asks what becomes visible when animal-centred and place-centred forms of ecological imagination are read together. The central claim is that Hughes and Heaney challenge human exceptionalism by different routes: Hughes makes the autonomy of non-human life difficult to ignore, while Heaney reveals the extent to which human identity is materially and historically embedded in landscape.

2. ECOCRITICISM AND THE READING OF POETRY

Ecocriticism provides a framework for asking how literary texts imagine relations between human beings and the physical environments they inhabit. Cheryll Glotfelty describes the field in terms of the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, a formulation that shifts critical attention beyond exclusively human concerns (Glotfelty and Fromm). Lawrence Buell similarly emphasizes the importance of environmental presence in literary representation and asks readers to consider how texts position the non-human world within human consciousness (Buell). Greg Garrard's account of ecocritical concepts further demonstrates that ecology in literature can involve wilderness, animals, pastoral traditions, pollution, dwelling, and competing ideas of environmental value (Garrard).

For this study, three ideas are particularly useful. The first is anthropocentrism: a habit of judging the world primarily according to human interests. The second is interdependence: the recognition that organisms and environments exist through relationships rather than in isolation. The third is ethical attention: the possibility that a changed way of seeing the

non-human world may influence the values through which environmental relationships are understood. These concepts do not require every poem to deliver an explicit ecological message. Instead, they allow the critic to examine what a poem makes visible, whose perspective it privileges, and how it complicates the human position.

The method used here is qualitative close reading. The selected poems are considered through voice, imagery, metaphor, setting, symbolism, rhythm of perception, and the distribution of agency between human and non-human entities. Critical scholarship on Hughes and Heaney is used to place the readings within

established discussions, while the argument remains focused on the poems themselves. The selection is deliberately limited and should not be taken as a claim about every work written by either poet.

3. TED HUGHES: ANIMAL PRESENCE AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN CONTROL

Hughes's ecological force lies partly in his refusal to make the human observer comfortable. His animals are frequently presented as centres of movement and pressure, governed by bodily capacities and environmental conditions rather than by human expectations. Keith Sagar's influential study of Hughes stresses the poet's attempt to recover contact with forms of energy that modern life can obscure (Sagar). This perspective helps explain why Hughes's animal poems often resist being reduced to simple moral allegories. The creatures remain creatures even when they acquire symbolic significance.

3.1 *Crow*: Survival Beyond the Human Frame

In *Crow*, survival is not presented as a uniquely human virtue. The crow's persistence makes the reader consider adaptation as a condition of life itself. The bird occupies an unstable world in which endurance depends on responsiveness rather than security. This matters ecocritically because the poem can be read without assuming that the creature exists primarily to symbolize a human experience. Its presence directs attention toward another mode of being.

The crow also complicates the idea that nature is orderly or morally reassuring.

Hughes's imaginative world contains violence, uncertainty, and struggle, but these qualities are not simply presented as defects in nature. They belong to an ecological reality that exceeds human preference. The poem therefore encourages a reading in which survival is understood through conditions of existence rather than through a purely human vocabulary of success and failure.

3.2 “Hawk Roosting”: Non-Human Perspective

“Hawk Roosting” is central to Hughes's challenge to anthropocentric perception because the hawk occupies the speaking position. The usual hierarchy between observer and observed is temporarily reversed: the reader is asked to encounter the world through a predator's consciousness. The hawk's confidence is tied to its physical capacities, its habitat, and the logic of hunting. As Gifford and Roberts note in their discussion of Hughes, animal representation in his work can bring readers into contact with energies that do not fit comfortably within conventional human moral categories (Gifford and Roberts).

The poem should not be treated as a straightforward celebration of domination. Its more significant effect is to expose the difference between ecological process and human moral judgement. Predation has a place within the hawk's mode of existence, and the poem makes that existence difficult to translate into human ethical language without remainder. The result is an encounter with alterity: the animal is not merely an object whose meaning has already been decided by the human viewer.

3.3 “Pike,” “The Thought-Fox,” and “Jaguar”

“Pike” develops a related tension between beauty and danger. The fish belongs to an aquatic environment whose depth, stillness, and concealed movement contribute to the poem's sense of threat. The creature's identity cannot be separated from its habitat. This connection between organism and environment is one of the poem's most productive ecological features: the pike is not an isolated symbol but a life-form whose presence is shaped by water, space, age, and predatory capacity.

In “The Thought-Fox,” the fox enters the poem through darkness and movement, and its appearance becomes entangled with the process of poetic creation. The animal is not simply an ornament added to an otherwise human meditation. Its arrival changes the speaker's imaginative field. “Jaguar,” meanwhile, explores the difficulty of containing animal vitality within a human-controlled setting. The observers can see the jaguar, but visual access does not guarantee complete understanding. Together, these poems

establish a recurring Hughesian problem: humans may watch, describe, classify, and contain, yet non-human life retains a dimension that resists full possession.

4. SEAMUS HEANEY: PLACE, MEMORY, AND MATERIAL EXPERIENCE

Heaney's ecological imagination develops less through the dramatic displacement of the human viewpoint than through an intensification of attention to place. His landscapes are inhabited, worked, remembered, and culturally inherited. The material details of rural life therefore carry several meanings at once. Soil can be agricultural matter and family history; a bog can be geological substance and a storehouse of memory; a well can be a physical feature and a source of imaginative curiosity. Elmer Andrews and Neil Corcoran both emphasize the importance of place, memory, and cultural experience in understanding Heaney's poetry (Andrews; Corcoran).

This place-based orientation creates a different ecological emphasis from Hughes. Heaney does not usually ask the reader to abandon the human viewpoint. Instead, he shows that the human viewpoint is itself formed through contact with land, work, seasons, family, and local history. The ecological question consequently becomes one of embeddedness: how can a person understand the self without also understanding the places that have helped make that self?

4.1 “Death of a Naturalist”: Childhood Encounter and Ecological Recognition

“Death of a Naturalist” begins with an intense attraction to the living environment. The child's attention is sensory and immediate, and the natural setting initially appears as a source of fascination. Yet the encounter changes when the creatures that had been observed from a safe distance become unsettlingly present. The movement from delight to discomfort is important because it prevents nature from being reduced to a pleasant picture. The child discovers that the non-human world has its own rhythms and cannot be arranged according to human expectations.

This shift can be understood as an early form of ecological education. The speaker learns not through a formal lesson but through an altered experience of the environment. Nature becomes less predictable and more independent. The poem therefore replaces a simplified pastoral ideal with a more complicated encounter in which curiosity, vulnerability, fear, and respect coexist. The change in perception is itself the poem's ecological event.

4.2 “Digging”: Labour, Land, and Inherited Identity

“Digging” connects writing with agricultural labour and family inheritance. The speaker observes the work of earlier generations and recognizes the spade as an instrument through which family history has been made material. He does not imitate that labour literally; instead, he establishes writing as his own form of work. The poem's ecological significance lies in this connection between identity and physical contact with land.

The soil in “Digging” is not an abstract symbol detached from ordinary life. It is handled, cut, planted, and remembered. Labour creates a relationship among generations, bodies, tools, and landscape. The speaker's decision to continue the family tradition in another medium does not erase the land-based history behind his identity. It acknowledges that intellectual and artistic selfhood can emerge from material environments.

4.3 “Bogland,” “Blackberry-Picking,” and “Personal Helicon”

“Bogland” gives the landscape unusual historical depth. The bog appears capable of preserving traces of earlier life and human history, so the ground becomes a medium through which the past remains materially present. The poem's ecological imagination is therefore inseparable from questions of memory and national or cultural inheritance. Landscape is not merely where history happens; it participates in the remembering of history.

“Blackberry-Picking” approaches ecological process through seasonal abundance and inevitable deterioration. The act of gathering fruit contains pleasure, anticipation, possession, and disappointment. The fruit changes, and that change exposes the limits of human desire to preserve freshness. “Personal Helicon” turns a well into a place of observation and imaginative formation. Looking into the physical depth of water becomes connected with the development of the poetic self. Across these poems, familiar environments become sites where material processes and human consciousness meet.

5. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: TWO MODES OF ECOLOGICAL ATTENTION

The strongest point of comparison between Hughes and Heaney is not that they describe the same version of nature, but that neither allows the environment to remain an inert backdrop. Hughes achieves this through animal presence. The crow, hawk, pike, fox, and jaguar repeatedly disturb the assumption that human beings possess the most important perspective. Heaney achieves a comparable effect through place. His fields, bogs, wells, soil, and seasonal spaces shape memory and identity so deeply that the human subject cannot be imagined as independent of landscape.

Their differences are equally significant. Hughes often emphasizes immediate bodily energy: movement, hunting, territory, danger, and survival. Heaney more frequently works through continuity: family labour, remembered places, agricultural cycles, language, and cultural inheritance. In Hughes, the ecological challenge often comes from confronting an existence that does not ask for human approval. In Heaney, the challenge comes from realizing that human identity is already entangled with environments that people may take for granted.

This contrast can be expressed as two forms of decentring. Hughes decentres the human observer by granting imaginative force to animal life. Heaney decentres the autonomous human self by demonstrating its dependence on place. The former asks, in effect, what the world looks like when human consciousness is not the only measure of value; the latter asks how human consciousness is produced by material and cultural surroundings. Read together, these approaches create a richer account of ecological interdependence.

The comparison also complicates the idea of environmental ethics. Neither poet offers a simple list of rules for responsible behaviour. Instead, their poetry alters attention. Hughes makes readers hesitate before turning animals into convenient symbols. Heaney makes readers notice how landscapes contain labour, memory, history, and loss. Ethical awareness can begin with precisely this change in perception: recognizing that the world is not exhausted by its usefulness to human beings.

6. ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Ecological consciousness involves more than knowledge about environmental problems. It also concerns the habits of perception through which humans understand their relationship with other forms of life. The selected poems contribute to this consciousness by refusing a purely utilitarian view of nature. Hughes's animals have their own modes of action; Heaney's landscapes have histories and material continuities that exceed immediate human use.

Jonathan Bate's ecological criticism is useful here because it connects literary imagination with the broader question of how human beings inhabit the earth (Bate). Buell's work likewise emphasizes the importance of making environmental presence central to literary interpretation (Buell). From this perspective, Hughes and Heaney matter because their poems train attention toward relationships rather than isolated objects. A hawk exists within an ecological pattern of hunting and territory; a field exists within labour, seasons, memory, and cultural history.

The ethical implication should not be exaggerated. A poem cannot substitute for environmental policy, scientific research, conservation, or collective action. It can, however, contribute to the imaginative conditions under which such responsibilities become intelligible. Literature can make dependence

emotionally and conceptually visible. In a period marked by ecological disruption, such visibility has intellectual value.

7. MAJOR FINDINGS

First, both poets give the natural world an active role in the production of meaning.

Nature is not simply a decorative background for human experience.

Second, both poets complicate anthropocentrism, but they do so differently. Hughes challenges human interpretive authority through animal perspective and autonomy; Heaney challenges the fantasy of human independence by rooting identity in landscape and material experience.

Third, Hughes's dominant ecological concerns in the selected poems include instinct, territoriality, predation, resilience, and survival, whereas Heaney's include place, labour, seasonal change, memory, inheritance, and belonging.

Fourth, ecological interdependence appears in two complementary forms. Hughes foregrounds relationships among organisms and habitats; Heaney foregrounds relationships among people, land, work, memory, and cultural continuity.

Fifth, the comparison demonstrates that environmental ethics can arise through forms of attention rather than explicit instruction. Both poets encourage readers to reconsider the limits of human mastery and the value of relationships with the more-than-human world.

8. CONCLUSION

A comparative reading of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney reveals two distinct but complementary ways of imagining human participation in the natural world. Hughes repeatedly confronts the reader with animals whose existence cannot be fully absorbed into human categories. His poetry gives force to instinct, bodily intelligence, territory, and survival, thereby weakening the assumption that humans occupy the unquestioned centre of ecological meaning.

Heaney approaches the problem from another direction. His poetry shows that people are already situated within landscapes shaped by work, memory, family, seasons, and cultural history. The human subject is therefore not outside nature looking in. It is formed through relationships with particular places. This insight makes Heaney's ecological vision strongly place-based, while Hughes's remains especially attentive to animal autonomy and non-human agency.

The value of reading the poets together lies in the tension between these perspectives. Hughes asks readers to take non-human life seriously on its own terms; Heaney asks readers to recognize the environmental foundations of human identity. Both positions challenge a simplified hierarchy in which nature is merely scenery or raw material. Their poems instead suggest a world of reciprocal influence, vulnerability, dependence, and continuity.

The study therefore concludes that an ecocritical approach can deepen the interpretation of both poets without reducing their work to environmental propaganda. Their poetry remains valuable because it makes ecological questions part of perception itself. By changing how readers encounter an animal, a field, a bog, a well, or a seasonal process, the poems can encourage a more careful understanding of what it means to share a world with forms of life and material systems that exceed human control.

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