

Instinct, Power, and Creative Consciousness: A Comparative Study of Ted Hughes’s “Hawk Roosting” and “The Thought-Fox”

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Abstract

Ted Hughes is widely recognised for his intense poetic exploration of the natural world, instinctual life, and the creative imagination. His poems often depict the raw energy of nature and the complex relationship between instinct and consciousness. This paper offers a comparative study of two of Hughes’s well-known poems, *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox*. While *Hawk Roosting* presents the voice of a predatory bird embodying absolute power and instinctive authority, *The Thought-Fox* portrays the mysterious process of poetic creation through the metaphor of a fox entering the poet’s mind. Through close textual analysis, this study examines how Hughes constructs two different forms of consciousness: one grounded in primal instinct and domination, and the other rooted in imagination and artistic creativity. By situating the poems within psychological frameworks, the paper argues that Hughes uses animal imagery not merely to represent nature but to explore deeper philosophical questions about power, creativity, and human consciousness.

Keywords: Ted Hughes, instinct, imagination, animal imagery, creative consciousness

1. Introduction

Ted Hughes is widely regarded as one of the most influential voices in twentieth-century English poetry. His work is characterised by an intense engagement with the natural world and a profound exploration of the instinctual energies that shape both animal and human existence. Throughout his career, Hughes developed a distinctive poetic vision in which animals, landscapes, and elemental forces become powerful vehicles for examining deeper psychological and existential realities. Rather than presenting nature as harmonious or pastoral, Hughes portrays it as a dynamic and often violent realm governed by survival, instinct, and raw vitality.

A defining feature of Hughes’s poetry is his persistent use of animal imagery. Animals in his poems are rarely simple decorative elements or conventional symbols; instead, they function as embodiments of primal consciousness and instinctual energy. Critics have often noted that Hughes’s animals possess a vivid autonomy that challenges anthropocentric perspectives. Through these figures, Hughes seeks to explore forces that exist beyond rational human thought, revealing a world driven by instinct, power, and elemental life (Sagar 21).

Hughes's poetic philosophy is intricately connected to his belief that modern society has become increasingly detached from the instinctual energies that once linked humans to the natural world. According to Hughes, poetry serves as a means of reconnecting with these deeper forces. By presenting animals as manifestations of pure vitality, his poetry attempts to recover a more authentic relationship between human consciousness and the natural environment. As Terry Gifford observes, Hughes's work anticipates many ideas later developed within ecocritical thought, particularly the idea that nature possesses its own autonomous agency independent of human interpretation (Gifford 54).

Two of Hughes's most widely studied poems, *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox*, were first published in Hughes's early collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The hawk expresses absolute confidence in its predatory authority and views the natural world as a structure that exists to support its power. The poem presents a striking representation of instinctual dominance and has frequently been interpreted as an exploration of the raw forces that govern survival in nature. In contrast, *The Thought-Fox* explores the mysterious process of poetic inspiration. The poem describes a poet sitting alone at midnight, waiting for a creative idea to emerge. Gradually, the imagined presence of a fox moving through a dark forest becomes a metaphor for the formation of the poem itself. Through this evocative image, Hughes transforms the act of writing into a process that appears instinctive, organic, and almost animal-like. The fox therefore symbolizes the emergence of creative consciousness from the poet's unconscious imagination.

Although both poems place animal at their centre, they represent two distinct dimensions of Hughes's poetic exploration of consciousness. The hawk embodies instinctual authority, power, and the ruthless logic of survival, while the fox represents imagination, creativity, and the mysterious workings of poetic inspiration. Despite these differences, both poems suggest that instinct and creativity arise from deeper natural energies that lie beyond ordinary rational awareness.

While previous studies have often examined *Hawk Roosting* as a poem about power and *The Thought-Fox* as a metaphor for poetic creativity, relatively few analyses have explored the relationship between these poems within a single comparative framework. Examining them together allows for a deeper understanding of Hughes's broader poetic project and his exploration of the relationship between instinct, imagination, and consciousness.

This paper, therefore, offers a comparative analysis of *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox*, focusing on how Hughes uses animal imagery to represent contrasting yet interconnected forms of awareness. Drawing upon psychological perspectives, the study argues that Hughes's animals function as symbolic mediators between the natural world and the human mind. Through the figures of the hawk and the fox, Hughes reveals that instinctual power and creative imagination are not separate forces but interconnected aspects of a deeper natural consciousness.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon insights from the psychological approach to literature, particularly theories associated with Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Psychological criticism focuses on the ways literary texts represent unconscious desires, instinctual impulses, and symbolic expressions of the human psyche.

Freud's concept of the unconscious is particularly useful in understanding Hughes's representation of instinctual energy. In Freud's model of the psyche, human behaviour is influenced by deep instinctual drives that operate beneath conscious awareness (Freud 15). These drives often emerge symbolically in artistic expression. Hughes's poetry frequently reflects this idea, presenting animals as manifestations of instinctual forces that lie beyond rational control.

Similarly, Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious provide another useful framework for interpreting Hughes's animal imagery. Jung suggests that certain symbolic figures recur across cultures because they emerge from deep structures of the human psyche (Jung 42). Animals in literature often function as archetypal representations of instinct, power, and transformation. In Hughes's poetry, animals frequently embody these primal psychological energies.

Through these psychological perspectives, this study interprets *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox* as poetic explorations of two interconnected dimensions of consciousness: instinctual power and creative imagination. The hawk represents an outward expression of primal instinct and dominance, while the fox symbolises the inward process through which creative ideas emerge from the unconscious mind.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Studies on Instinct and Animal Consciousness in Ted Hughes's Poetry

The poetry of Hughes has received considerable scholarly attention for its powerful representation of instinct, violence, and the animal world. Critics often observe that Hughes departs from the Romantic tradition of depicting nature as harmonious and benevolent. Instead, his poems present nature as a realm governed by raw energy, survival, and instinct. Animals in Hughes's poetry often function as symbolic embodiments of primal forces that exist beyond human moral and intellectual structures.

Keith Sagar argues that animals in Hughes's poetry represent "pure, instinctual life untouched by the moral and intellectual complications of human society" (Sagar 21). According to Sagar, Hughes believed that animals embody a form of natural vitality that modern humans have largely lost due to the dominance of rational consciousness and social conditioning. In poems such as *Hawk Roosting*, this instinctual force is portrayed in its most uncompromising form, revealing a world structured by dominance, power, and survival.

3.2 Ecocritical Interpretations of Hughes's Nature Poetry

Another significant body of criticism approaches Hughes's poetry from an ecological perspective. Terry Gifford emphasises that Hughes's work anticipates many ideas later developed in modern ecocriticism. Gifford suggests that Hughes presents nature not merely as a background for human experience but as an autonomous and dynamic system with its own forms of consciousness (Gifford 54).

In *Hawk Roosting*, the hawk's voice illustrates a non-human perspective that exists independently of human moral values. By allowing the hawk to articulate its own worldview, Hughes challenges anthropocentric assumptions and compels readers to confront the unsettling autonomy of the natural

world. This ecological perspective highlights Hughes's effort to re-establish a deeper connection between humans and the primal energies of nature.

3.3. Psychological Interpretations of Animal Imagery

A further critical approach interprets Hughes's animal poetry through psychological and symbolic frameworks. Neil Roberts argues that Hughes often uses animals as symbolic representations of instinctual forces within the human psyche (Roberts 87). From this perspective, the animals in Hughes's poetry are not merely elements of the natural world but also reflections of deeper psychological energies.

Within this framework, the hawk in *Hawk Roosting* can be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of aggressive and dominating impulses present within human consciousness. The poem thus becomes an exploration of the darker aspects of instinct that lie beneath the surface of civilised behaviour.

3.4. Critical Perspectives on Poetic Creativity in *The Thought-Fox*

While *Hawk Roosting* has been widely analysed in terms of power and domination, *The Thought-Fox* has attracted scholarly attention primarily for its representation of poetic creativity. In this poem, Hughes presents the creative process as mysterious, instinctive, and intricately connected to the unconscious mind rather than to deliberate intellectual effort.

Sagar observes that the fox symbolises the gradual emergence of poetic inspiration from the unconscious imagination of the poet (Sagar 43). The fox's slow and cautious movement through the darkness parallels the subtle formation of poetic ideas within the poet's mind, suggesting that creativity originates from instinctual energies rather than rational planning.

Similarly, Gifford notes that Hughes believed poetry arises from a deep engagement with imaginative and instinctive forces that exist beneath conscious thought (Gifford 61). In *The Thought-Fox*, the arrival of poetic inspiration is dramatised through the metaphor of an animal entering the poet's mental landscape and finally leaving its "prints" in the poem itself.

3.5. Recent Scholarship on Animal Symbolism and Consciousness

Recent studies have continued to explore Hughes's use of animals as symbolic representations of deeper psychological and philosophical themes. Contemporary scholars argue that Hughes's animals often function as metaphors for different forms of consciousness that exist beyond ordinary human awareness.

Shah, Misra, and Dev observe that animals in Hughes's poetry frequently embody instinctual vitality and raw natural energy. According to their analysis, Hughes uses animal imagery to explore the tension between human rationality and the instinctual forces that continue to influence human behaviour (Shah, Misra, and Dev 93).

Similarly, Mahid and her colleagues argue that the hawk in *Hawk Roosting* represents a form of absolute authority rooted in instinctual dominance. Their study emphasises that the hawk's voice reveals a

worldview structured by power and control, reflecting fundamental aspects of instinctual consciousness (Mahid et al. 98).

These recent critical perspectives demonstrate that Hughes's poetry continues to generate scholarly interest because of its complex exploration of instinct, imagination, and the relationship between animals and human consciousness.

3.6. Need for Comparative Study

Despite the substantial body of scholarship on Hughes's animal poetry, relatively few studies have examined *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox* together within a single analytical framework. Most critical discussions analyse these poems separately, interpreting "Hawk Roosting" primarily as a representation of instinctual power and "The Thought-Fox" as a metaphor for poetic inspiration.

However, a comparative examination reveals an important thematic relationship between instinct and creativity. Both poems explore different forms of consciousness that emerge from deeper natural energies. The hawk embodies the raw instinct of power and domination, while the fox symbolises the instinctive process of creative imagination.

This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by placing the two poems in dialogue with each other. Through a comparative analysis informed by psychological perspectives, the research explores how Hughes employs animal imagery to represent two interconnected dimensions of consciousness: instinctual power and creative imagination.

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative study

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis in order to examine the thematic and symbolic dimensions of *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox* by Ted Hughes. Qualitative literary analysis is particularly appropriate for this research because the study focuses on interpreting poetic language, imagery, symbolism, and narrative voice rather than on quantitative data.

The primary texts for the analysis are Hughes's poems *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox*, which are widely recognized as significant examples of his animal poetry. These poems were selected because they represent two contrasting yet interconnected aspects of Hughes's poetic vision: instinctual power and creative imagination. By examining these poems comparatively, the study seeks to explore how Hughes employs animal imagery to articulate different forms of consciousness.

The study is primarily based on close reading, a critical practice commonly used in literary studies to examine the detailed structure and language of a text. Close reading enables the researcher to analyse specific elements such as imagery, diction, metaphor, narrative voice, and thematic patterns. Particular attention is given to the ways in which Hughes constructs the perspectives of the hawk and the fox through vivid sensory descriptions and symbolic imagery.

In the case of Hawk Roosting, the analysis focuses on the poem's dramatic monologue form, examining how the hawk's voice expresses dominance, authority, and instinctual certainty. Key lines from the poem are analyzed to understand how Hughes represents the natural world from a non-human perspective and how this perspective challenges conventional moral or anthropocentric interpretations of nature.

Similarly, the analysis of The Thought-Fox examines the poem's symbolic structure and imagery in order to understand how Hughes represents the creative process. The movements of the fox through the imagined forest are interpreted as metaphors for the gradual emergence of poetic inspiration. Attention is given to the sensory imagery and rhythmic progression of the poem, which reflect the unfolding of creative consciousness.

4.2. Comparative analytical approach

The study also adopts a comparative analytical approach. After examining each poem individually, the analysis compares their thematic structures, narrative perspectives, and symbolic functions. This comparison highlights both similarities and contrasts in Hughes's representation of animals and consciousness. While Hawk Roosting emphasises instinctual authority and domination, The Thought-Fox portrays the subtle emergence of imagination and artistic creativity.

In addition to the primary textual analysis, the study also draws upon secondary scholarly sources, including critical works by major Hughes scholars such as Keith Sagar, Terry Gifford, and Neil Roberts. These sources provide important contextual insights into Hughes's poetic philosophy, his treatment of animal imagery, and the broader critical debates surrounding his work.

Through this combined methodological approach close textual analysis, comparative interpretation, and theoretical contextualisation the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Hughes uses animal imagery to explore the relationship between instinct, power, and creative consciousness.

5. Analysis

5.1 Instinct and Absolute Power in Hawk Roosting

"Hawk Roosting" is written as a dramatic monologue in which the hawk speaks directly to the reader. The poem opens with a declaration of dominance:

"I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream."

The hawk's position "in the top of the wood" suggests both physical and symbolic superiority. From this elevated position, the hawk observes and controls its surroundings. The phrase "no falsifying dream" emphasises the hawk's pure instinctual existence, free from the illusions and moral complexities associated with human consciousness.

Throughout the poem, the hawk repeatedly asserts its authority over the natural world:

"The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me."

Nature itself appears to serve the hawk's purposes. The hawk views the environment not as a harmonious ecosystem but as a structure designed to support its power.

The most striking expression of this dominance occurs in the lines:

“I kill where I please because it is all mine.”

Here the hawk embodies the ruthless logic of survival. There is no sense of guilt or moral hesitation; killing is presented as a natural and inevitable act. Hughes thus presents a vision of nature governed by instinctual authority rather than ethical considerations.

The poem concludes with the hawk declaring:

“Nothing has changed since I began.

My eye has permitted no change.

I am going to keep things like this.”

These lines reinforce the hawk's desire for control and permanence. Some critics have interpreted the hawk as a metaphor for political tyranny or authoritarian power. However, it can also be understood as a representation of pure instinctual consciousness — a form of power that exists beyond human morality.

5.2 Creative Imagination in The Thought-Fox

In contrast to the aggressive tone of “Hawk Roosting”, “The Thought-Fox” is quiet, reflective, and mysterious. The poem describes a poet sitting alone at midnight with a blank page, waiting for inspiration.

The poem begins with an atmosphere of stillness:

“I imagine this midnight moment's forest:

Something else is alive

Beside the clock's loneliness.”

The “midnight moment's forest” represents the unconscious realm from which creative ideas emerge. The phrase “something else is alive” suggests the presence of an unseen force or inspiration.

Gradually, the fox appears as a metaphor for the emerging poem:

“A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;

Two eyes serve a movement, that now

And again now, and now.”

The fox moves carefully through the forest, just as an idea slowly takes shape in the poet's mind. Hughes uses sensory imagery to capture the gradual process of inspiration.

As the fox approaches, the poem itself begins to form:

“Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox

It enters the dark hole of the head.”

This moment represents the arrival of full creative awareness. The fox entering “the dark hole of the head” symbolises the merging of imagination and consciousness.

The poem concludes with the line:

“The page is printed.”

This final line marks the completion of the creative process. The once-blank page now contains the poem that has emerged from the depths of imagination.

5.3 Comparative Perspective

Although both poems feature animals, their symbolic roles differ significantly.

The hawk represents instinctual power, dominance, and control. Its voice is confident and authoritative, reflecting a worldview based on strength and survival. The fox, on the other hand, represents creativity and imagination. Its movement is subtle and mysterious, mirroring the delicate emergence of poetic thought.

Another important difference lies in narrative perspective. In *Hawk Roosting*, the animal itself speaks, creating a direct and powerful voice. In *The Thought-Fox*, the poet remains the observer, describing the fox's movements as a metaphor for the creative process.

Despite these differences, both poems reveal Hughes's fascination with the connection between animals and deeper forms of consciousness. Animals become a medium through which Hughes explores forces that lie beyond ordinary human awareness.

6. Discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Hughes employs animal imagery to represent two complementary dimensions of existence. The hawk symbolises the raw instinctual energy that governs survival in the natural world, while the fox symbolises the hidden processes of imagination and creativity. These poems also reflect Hughes's broader poetic philosophy. He believed that modern society often suppresses instinctual and imaginative energies, leading to a disconnection from nature. By portraying animals as embodiments of powerful natural forces, Hughes attempts to reconnect human consciousness with these deeper energies.

Furthermore, the poems illustrate Hughes's distinctive poetic style, characterised by vivid imagery, dramatic voice, and intense engagement with the natural world. Through these stylistic features, Hughes transforms ordinary animals into profound metaphors for psychological and philosophical exploration.

7. Conclusion

When examined together, these poems reveal an important aspect of Hughes's broader poetic philosophy. Instinct and creativity, often perceived as opposing forces, are shown to originate from the same natural energies that shape both animal life and human thought. The hawk represents the outward expression of instinctual power in the natural world, while the fox represents the inward manifestation of that same instinctual energy within the creative mind.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights Hughes's distinctive poetic technique, particularly his use of vivid imagery, animal symbolism, and dramatic voice to explore complex philosophical questions. By transforming animals into symbolic mediators between nature and human consciousness, Hughes expands the possibilities of poetic expression and invites readers to reconsider the boundaries between the natural and the imaginative worlds. The study demonstrates that Hughes's animal poetry functions as more than a representation of wildlife or natural landscapes. Instead, it becomes a profound exploration of the forces that shape existence itself: instinct, power, imagination, and creativity. Through the figures of the hawk and the fox, Hughes reveals that the energies of nature continue to operate within the human mind,

influencing both our perceptions of the world and the creative processes through which we seek to understand it.

The comparative analysis of *Hawk Roosting* and *The Thought-Fox* demonstrates the depth of Ted Hughes's engagement with instinct, power, and creative consciousness. Through the symbolic figures of the hawk and the fox, Hughes explores two interconnected dimensions of existence: the outward expression of instinctual power and the inward emergence of creative imagination. While the hawk represents the uncompromising authority of primal instinct in the natural world, the fox symbolises the mysterious process through which creative inspiration arises from the unconscious mind. By transforming animals into symbolic mediators between nature and human consciousness, Hughes expands the possibilities of poetic expression and challenges conventional boundaries between instinct and intellect. Ultimately, these poems reveal Hughes's belief that the energies of nature continue to shape both human behaviour and artistic creativity.

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