

Predatory Masculinities: A Gendered Re-reading of Ted Hughes's *Hawk Roosting*

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Abstract—This study re-examines Ted Hughes's *Hawk Roosting* through the prism of gender theory, arguing that the poem enacts a distinct mode of predatory masculinity embedded within its language, symbolism, and ideological posture. Traditionally interpreted as a poetic embodiment of political tyranny, individual ego, or natural instinct, the hawk's monologue has rarely been investigated in relation to the cultural scripts of masculine authority it performs. Addressing this lacuna, the present paper analyses how Hughes's representation of predation intersects with post-war British anxieties surrounding power, violence, and the naturalisation of hierarchical control. Drawing upon close reading, discourse analysis, eco-masculinity studies, and contextual literary history, the research contends that the hawk's voice stages a form of hypermasculine identity characterised by sovereign self-authorization, vertical dominance, and uncompromising territoriality. The findings reveal that Hughes neither straightforwardly condemns nor glorifies such masculinity; instead, the poem deliberately holds readers within an uneasy tension between natural behaviour and ideological aggression. The discussion extends this argument by situating predatory masculinity within broader ecological and ethical debates. The study concludes by outlining avenues for future scholarship within eco-gender criticism and modern British poetry.

Index Terms—Predatory Masculinity, Gender Performativity, Eco-Masculinity, Ted Hughes, Discourse of Power, Posthumanist Poetics.

1. Introduction

Few poems in modern British literature have inspired as sustained and diverse a critical response as Ted Hughes's *Hawk Roosting*. Since its appearance in *Lupercal* (1960), the poem has repeatedly drawn scholars back to its unsettling fusion of self-possession, instinct, and violence. Early critics tended to emphasise Hughes's fascination with the raw energies of nature, treating the hawk as a symbol of unmediated instinct. Keith Sagar, one of Hughes's most perceptive commentators, famously underscored the poet's belief in a universe governed by energies indifferent to human moral categories. From this angle, *Hawk Roosting* appears as an almost zoological monologue spoken by a creature perfectly at ease within its biological role.

Another influential body of scholarship departed from this naturalistic emphasis and read the poem as a political allegory. Commentators, especially during the post-war decades, often

compared the hawk's absolutist rhetoric to the discourse of totalitarian regimes—an interpretation further encouraged by the poem's chilling confidence and its repeated assertions of dominion. Seamus Heaney and others have suggested that the voice of the hawk, whether intended as such or not, resembles the logic of authoritarian power. Thus, *Hawk Roosting* has frequently been read as a critique of tyranny, an allegory for the human drive toward domination, or a dramatization of political hubris.

Parallel to these interpretations, linguistic and stylistic analyses have paid careful attention to the poem's formal construction. Scholars of stylistics note the role of declarative syntax, abrupt sentence structure, and a lexicon saturated with possession and command. These features converge to create a voice that appears utterly assured of its authority. Cognitive-poetic readings further suggest that the poem engineers a highly controlled mental world, one in which alternative perspectives simply do not register. In more recent decades, posthumanist critics have approached the poem as an experiment in decentering human consciousness. By granting articulate interiority to a nonhuman predator, Hughes disrupts anthropocentric assumptions, unsettling the expectation that moral reflection belongs exclusively to humans.

Although these strands of scholarship illuminate crucial dimensions of the poem, a surprisingly persistent gap remains: the absence of a sustained gender-based interpretation. The hawk's voice, marked by absolute certainty, territorial sovereignty, and violent self-definition, aligns strongly with cultural constructions of masculinity—especially those expressed within post-war British discourse. R. W. Connell's theorisation of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful lens here: a culturally sanctioned ideal that legitimises dominance, hierarchy, and control. The hawk's rhetoric—its insistence that “the whole of Creation” has bent itself toward perfecting its predatory instrument—echoes the self-mythologizing patterns Connell identifies.

Judith Butler's work on gender performativity offers another critical entry point. The hawk's declarations do not merely describe its identity; they enact it. Statements such as “I kill where I please” or “I hold Creation in my foot” function as performative acts through which the speaker produces the very authority it claims. Such a dynamic invites us to interpret the poem not only as a reflection on nature or power but also as an

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instance of gendered performance, where masculinity is continually reaffirmed through speech.

Eco-feminist theory deepens this argument. Val Plumwood's critique of the "mastery" model illuminates how patriarchal traditions have historically intertwined domination of nature with domination of others. When the hawk naturalises its sovereignty, it participates—consciously or not—in the discursive structures that justify human exploitation of both ecological and social systems. Yet despite the availability of these theoretical frameworks, the field of eco-masculinity has seldom been applied to Hughes's work. The lack is striking: *Hawk Roosting* may be one of the most vivid poetic performances of hierarchical masculinity in twentieth-century literature.

Thus, although critics have explored the poem from political, ecological, and existential angles, they have not fully addressed how Hughes's rhetorical strategies construct a deeply gendered mode of authority. The present study seeks to fill that gap. By integrating close reading with gender theory and ecofeminist critique, the paper argues that *Hawk Roosting* stages a performance of predatory masculinity that is simultaneously compelling, disturbing, and ideologically revealing. Such an approach not only reframes the poem but also encourages a more nuanced understanding of Hughes's broader poetic project, wherein nature becomes a mirror in which cultural anxieties about masculinity, power, and definition are sharply reflected.

2. Methods

This study adopts a methodological approach that moves between textual analysis, theoretical interpretation, and contextual inquiry. The aim is not to reduce the poem to a single ideological reading but to trace the mechanisms through which masculinity is constructed within its language.

The first methodological component is close textual analysis, through which the poem's vocabulary, syntax, tonal patterns, and metaphorical structures are examined. This method involves attending closely to the hawk's declarations, noting how Hughes's stylistic discipline—his selection of verbs, the controlled rhythm of the lines, and the repetition of possessive forms—produces an aura of unassailable authority.

The second component is discourse analysis, focusing on how the hawk's monologue resembles known rhetorical patterns of masculine dominance. These include absolutist statements, assertions of sovereignty, and the erasure of alternative viewpoints. Discourse analysis allows the study to move beyond what the hawk says to how the hawk says it and to what such speech acts imply within larger cultural frameworks.

A third layer involves the application of gender and eco-masculinity theory. Connell and Butler's insights help interpret the hawk's identity as something performed and upheld through repeated assertions. Eco-feminist theories—particularly Plumwood's critique of mastery—help situate the poem within ongoing debates about the conceptual bonding of masculinity and dominance over nature.

The analysis is further supported by contextualization within

post-war British culture, a period marked by profound tensions surrounding the loss of imperial authority and changing gender roles. While this approach avoids reducing the poem to biography or history, it recognizes that cultural atmospheres inevitably shape literary articulation.

Finally, a comparative interpretive method is employed. By contrasting this reading with earlier political or naturalistic interpretations, the study demonstrates how a gender-focused reading supplements rather than contradicts existing scholarship.

3. Results

The results of this interdisciplinary inquiry reveal several interconnected dynamics through which the poem constructs predatory masculinity.

The first finding concerns the naturalisation of authority. The hawk speaks as though its power were inscribed into the fabric of creation itself. When it declares that all of creation contributed to producing its killing foot, the poem frames dominance not merely as instinct but as cosmic endorsement. This naturalisation mirrors ideological moves within hegemonic masculinity, wherein dominance is treated as inevitable rather than constructed.

A second finding involves the spatial metaphors of the poem. The hawk's roosting position at the top of the tree becomes a literalisation of social and gendered hierarchy. Height here is not only physical but epistemological and moral. The hawk sees more because it sits above others; it is entitled to judge, act, and kill because its vantage point is superior. This spatial symbolism resonates deeply with patriarchal traditions that associate masculinity with verticality, superiority, and oversight.

Thirdly, the hawk's rhetoric bears the hallmarks of hypermasculine discourse. Expressions of pleasure in control, the absence of empathy, and the repeated insistence on autonomy all align with psychological studies of masculine aggression. The hawk becomes a figure of self-contained, self-legitimizing male authority—one that brooks no competition or challenge. The voice's certainty ironically exposes its fragility; such absolute declarations often signal an underlying anxiety about maintaining supremacy.

A fourth result emerges from the poem's tonal ambiguity. Although the hawk speaks with total confidence, Hughes's tight control of language invites readers to question whether such confidence is as stable as it appears. The hawk's voice is so self-assured that it approaches caricature, subtly prompting readers to interrogate the ideological assumptions that sustain such certainty.

Finally, the poem can be read as a critique—however oblique—of naturalised masculine authority. By allowing the hawk's monologue to unfold without interruption, Hughes exposes the logic of domination to scrutiny. The hawk's voice is persuasive, but its persuasiveness becomes unsettling, prompting ethical reflection.

4. Discussion

The implications of these findings open several important avenues for rethinking both *Hawk Roosting* and Hughes's wider poetic concerns.

The first concerns masculinity as performance. Butler's concept of performativity helps illuminate the poem's central mechanism: the hawk becomes masculine not because of its biology but because of the repeated acts of dominance its language enacts. Each statement reinforces the identity it claims. Masculinity thus emerges as a discursive construct rather than a natural essence.

Secondly, the poem resonates strongly with post-war anxieties about masculinity. As Britain's imperial stature declined and cultural expectations surrounding gender shifted, traditional models of masculinity appeared increasingly unstable. The hawk—self-contained, imperious, and violently self-assured—can be interpreted as a symbolic response to this instability. The poem registers, even if indirectly, the tension between older ideals of control and the realities of a changing world.

Another crucial dimension is the role of nature as an ideological vehicle. Hughes constructs a nonhuman speaker whose behaviour is biologically rooted, yet the poem's language continually slips between natural instinct and ideological assertion. This oscillation forces readers to interrogate the extent to which domination is "natural." The poem does not offer easy answers; instead, it foregrounds the risk involved in using nature to legitimate human systems of power.

Related to this is the risk of romanticising violent masculinity. Some detractors have accused Hughes of glorifying aggression, yet the poem is more ambivalent than such critiques allow. Hughes presents the hawk's voice with a precision that simultaneously expresses its charisma and its underlying emptiness. Its confidence is arresting, but the voice carries with it an echo of hollowness, almost as though it cannot tolerate dialogue or opposition. This tension complicates interpretations of the poem as celebratory.

From an ecological standpoint, the poem challenges readers to consider the ethics of projecting human ideologies onto nature. If the hawk is read merely as a biological predator, its violence seems natural; but once the hawk becomes a metaphorical construct, the stakes shift. The poem invites reflection on the ways human societies justify domination by appealing to biological analogies. Eco-masculinity theory thus finds fertile ground here, as the poem exposes the ideological mechanics behind such analogies.

Finally, the poem's implications extend to Hughes's broader poetics. While Hughes is often celebrated for his vivid portrayals of the natural world, this study suggests that his nature poems also serve as sites where human ideological constructs—particularly those related to masculinity—are tested, interrogated, and sometimes destabilized. *Hawk Roosting*, in this light, is not simply a monologue of instinct but a meditation on the seductive dangers of masculine authority.

A. Future Scope of Study

Future research can extend this inquiry in several ways. Comparative studies may examine how masculine predation appears in Hughes's other animal poems or in the work of contemporaries such as Seamus Heaney or Philip Larkin. Eco-masculinity could be developed further as a lens for interpreting nature poetry more broadly, tracing how ecological metaphors shape—and are shaped by—cultural constructions of gender. Further interdisciplinary work might explore how literature participates in reimagining or resisting forms of domination in an era increasingly attuned to ecological vulnerability and gender complexity.

In essence, the present research establishes that masculinity—particularly in its predatory, hegemonic form—is central to understanding *Hawk Roosting* and, by extension, offers a promising avenue for rethinking the intersections of gender, power, and poetic imagination in twentieth-century literature.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that *Hawk Roosting* is a key text for examining the construction and performance of masculinity in modern poetry. Through its meticulous linguistic design and symbolic economy, the poem articulates a form of predatory masculinity that is simultaneously commanding and precarious. The hawk's voice embodies hegemonic ideals—autonomy, control, predation—yet its very insistence betrays the instability inherent in maintaining such a posture.

By bringing together gender theory, eco-feminism, eco-masculinity studies, and close textual analysis, this paper has highlighted previously overlooked dimensions of Hughes's work. The poem's refusal to offer moral clarity is part of its strength; it forces readers to confront the ease with which authority becomes naturalised and the discomfort that arises when such naturalisation is made explicit.

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