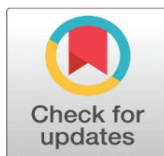


# TREATMENT OF WARFARE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: INSIGHTS FROM TED HUGHES'S POETRY

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DOI  
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4305](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.4305)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

War machinery plays havoc on both human and non-human world. The 20th century in human history has witnessed two World Wars and various minor wars. Loss of human lives, widespread displacements, trauma, climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction underscore the catastrophe looming over the planet in 21st century. Ted Hughes, a renowned British poet, has been placed among the greatest poets of the second half of the 20th century. The present research explores how Hughes's poetry reflects the destructive impact of warfare on the environment. The research also delves into the profound connection between war and the environmental crisis in the present century. Environmental poetics is anti-War in principle and practice. Drawing upon Environmental poetics and ecocritical theory, this paper seeks to contextualize Ted Hughes's work within the broader environmental discourse of the present era. Hughes's poetic language, imagery and symbolism reveals the brutality of war and its horrendous consequences on the natural world. The brutality of wars reflects the instinct and bloody side of modern people and modern society. His poetic oeuvre also provides a lens through which to view and contemplate the destructive potential of human behaviour and its impact on the natural environment.

**Keywords:** War, Catastrophe, Non-Human World, Environmental Poetics, Interconnectedness

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes had first-hand experience of war as his father and uncle had fought in the World War I. His father, William Henry Hughes was one of the only seventeen survivors of an entire battalion massacred by Turkish artillery at Gallipoli in May 1915. As a teenager, Hughes's youth was influenced whether by the terrible experiences of war memoirs of his family members and people after the First & Second World War or by its consequences. Hughes was shocked by the rough environment in which he grew up because he loved natural environment. His father's war stories were so vividly recounted, and his psychological scars so intense, that Hughes felt as though he had personally experienced the devastating carnage. In an article "Ted Hughes: War Poet" Jeffrey Meyers keenly observes that "his father's trauma and survivor's guilt, passed on to Hughes as a child, continued to torment his life and influence his art. The subject of war matched his instinctive taste for violence, and death was the dominant theme of the most bloody and horrific poetry..." (31) Hughes's poetic world intertwined the predatory instincts of fierce birds and animals with the violence of war, while contrasting the peaceful existence of gentler creatures with the brutal killing of men in battle.

The publication of *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) introduced Ted Hughes's new poetic idiom in the literary world. Hughes's stylistic originality and interest in natural world and primitive cultures was viewed as a new incident in British poetry by some of the early critics and reviewers. Most of the critics were unanimous in their praise for his originality and his courage to depict the neglected world of nature. Terry Gifford's interpretation of Hughes's early poetry clearly mentions that:

If non-human and human natural forces were Hughes's major subject in this collection, it was his attitude towards them that divided his first readers. Was he celebrating life forces, or was he dangerously attracted to violence and destructive forces? . . . It is now clear that writing a deliberately anti-pastoral poetry that attacked emotional and intellectual complacency about inner and outer nature in order to be able to seek more positive explorations of the inner life that humans might have among the creative and destructive forces of their home environment. (*Ted* 33)

This background makes Ted Hughes anti-anthropocentric. He views its rationalist and scientific character behind the destruction of ecosystem on earth. The question that Gifford raises regarding violence and morality actually continued for a long time.

## 2. ENVIRONMENTAL POETICS

*The Hawk in the Rain* shows Hughes's environmental vision in a wider context of technological violence and pressures on ecosystem in human or non-human world. Environmental poetics is anti-War in principle and practice. Hughes directly aligns himself with this feature of environmental activism. On the page of ASLE official website, the message defines the spirit and objectives that have made it a global community. The message reads: "we care about issues like biodiversity, environmental justice, survival in a time of endemic precarity and global catastrophe, and the effects of climate change on humans and nonhumans alike." (A Message) In this vision of ASLE, environmental justice and ecological sustainability require proper attention towards issues of violence and war damaging ecosystem of the planet earth at mass level. Critical studies of Ted Hughes have often ignored his anti-war stand. Helen Melody, Lead Curator, Contemporary Literary and Creative archives at the British Library, London (2008), in her article "Ted Hughes and War" examines how his poetry from *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) to *Wolfwatching* (1989) was "overshadowed by the legacy of one war and foreshadowed by the arrival of the next". She further observes:

While the impact of the First World War was particularly striking, the Second World War also affected the young Hughes, with the departure of his much loved older brother, Gerald, to the RAF keenly felt. It is interesting to note that the subject of Hughes and war is one of the less explored areas of the poet's work. Nevertheless, war had a major impact upon Hughes's life and work, and as Professor Dennis Walder wrote, Hughes was a 'war poet at one remove, writing out of the impact of memory – the individual memory of his father, and the collective memory of English culture.' (Melody)

Hughes understood that the destructive roles that wars play are more than one. In *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*, the poet perceives different environmental threats in the popularity of scientific morality of the new age which are intense and strongly conveyed.

In Hughes studies, generally skipping poems such as "Grief for Dead Soldiers", "Six Young Men", "Bayonet Charge" and "The Casualty" are quite unlike the spirit of environmental discourse. Environmental poetics is anti-War in principle and practice. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the poems in a way that draws parallels between the destructive power of war and the environmental catastrophe of the present century. The violence and destruction portrayed in the poems can be seen as a metaphor for the environmental damage caused by human activities such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change. In this sense, these poems can be read as a warning against the dangers of unchecked human aggression and its potential impact on the natural world. The poems remind us of the importance of recognizing the destructive power of our actions and the need for responsible stewardship of the planet.

In the present paper, I have made an attempt to examine the poetry of Ted Hughes not in terms of non-human imagery or symbolism, but non-human agencies which, in his poetry, have a 'life of their own'. However, it needs to be made clear that the non-human network of agencies is expansive – inclusive and non-dualistic. The apparent dualism between the human and non-human is for broadening the poetic and cultural space for the non-human agencies. Treatment or attitude towards non-human and natural world is merely a component of the broad meaning of environmentalism, as a

philosophy or activism. A reading of these poems with environmental poetics provides fresh insights about the abundance of animal images in the early poetry of Hughes.

Hughes's first poem of war "The Casualty" presents a pathetic situation where an English airman crashes and burns on the native land. The farmers and housewives are waiting with interest for the evening news before rushing out to find the crashed, burning airman. This was a routine scene in war-ridden Europe. In Hughes's poem the victim soldier's reactions to his surrounding environment are confused. The poetic voice leaves him becoming a new creature:

A snake in the gloom of the brambles or a rare flower –  
See the grave of dead leaves have suddenly, hear  
It was a man fell out of the air alive, (Keegan, *Collected Poems* 42)

Despite the terror which all the onlookers share, there is no reticence in the poet's language in capturing the disaster. He does not see it in popular nationalist rhetoric or other justifications of war and tragedy. Without making the soldier directly speak any word, Hughes tries to express the pain and tragedy inherent in this particular case which was getting universalized everywhere. Doing what everybody will have to do in this kind of mini dramatic tragedy, the scale of tragic impact is added through the response of the watching crowd. The watchers are:

Too tender to let break, start to the edge  
Of such horror close as mourners can,  
Greedy to share all that is undergone,  
Grimace, gasp, gesture of death. Till they look down  
On the handkerchief at which his eye stares up. (CP 43)

War poems of Hughes have a common point of environmental interest with those on more pronounced subjects of non-human and natural world. In both, witnesses and onlookers are significant to his environmental poetics. His well sustained arguments on division of 'inner and outer life' have early outlets in dramatic situations with or without presence of non-human agencies. In "The Casualty" when the onlookers fail to relate with the subjective tragedy of the dying airman, they are also refusing their own individuality, a pre-condition to a proper acceptance of ecosystem and its complete sanctity.

In "Grief for Dead Soldiers", Hughes satirizes ceremonial and insensitive formalization of war experience and memorials. The personal and public agony is categorized in three different forms of grief. The mightiest expression is ironically the public grief expressed at the unveiling of a cenotaph:

Mightiest, like some universal cataclysm,  
Will be the unveiling of their cenotaph:  
The crowds will stand struck, like the painting of a terror. (CP 44)

War destroys the cultural ecology of place and people in several ways. Public expression of grief is often impersonal and disconnected from the real form of tragedy. Real tragedy occurs secretly through private grief which is that of a lonely widow:

The doors and the windows open like great gates to a hell  
Still she will cry cups from table to sink.  
She cannot build her sorrow into a monument  
And walk away from it. Closer than thinking  
The dead man hangs around her neck, but never  
Close enough to be touched, or thanked even,  
For being all that remains in a world smashed. (CP 44)

In poetry of First World War that Wilfred Owen championed with a firsthand experience of suffering and tragedy, 'hell' is a popular descriptive word. Ted Hughes reproduces the setting of that experience in "The doors and the windows open like great gates to a hell". The ceremony where the widows come to pay homage is like 'gates to hell'. Her sorrow is immense and deep for the tragic loss of her love. She grieves for the smashing of her world, not, purely, of his body. She never sees or imagines the smashed body. Her greatest horror is watching her own hands, automatic, numb with apprehension, opening the telegram. Her grief is private and true for herself alone. True grief in Part III finally recognizes

that death in war is meaningless. Under a deceptive blue sky and with flowers blooming, the mass-grave diggers hack at the stubborn ground as "the dead wait like brides/To surrender their limbs." (CP 45) Hughes bitterly concludes that as the black flies swarm into the corpses and bite the diggers' wrists:

The burial party works with a craftsman calm.  
Weighing their grief by the ounce, and burying it. (CP 45)

The active use of memory takes another form in "Six Young Men" which is about soldiers photographed against a landscape which Hughes knows well "From where these sit/You hear the water of seven streams fall." (CP 45) The soldiers as young men lived in their 'homes' and settings. The feeling of place, natural landscape and community living their youthful phase of life had – all is described in a delicate poetic idiom. This picture is of their life before entering the hellish warfare "To the roarer in the bottom, and through all/The leafy valley a rumouring of air go." (CP 45) In these lines, two environmental dimensions are present. In his later poetry when Ted Hughes revisits his birthplace setting of Yorkshires, he mainly recreates an imaginative response to ruinous impact of industrialization. In this poem, the 'leafy valley' is clearly a reference to Calder valley. The ecocritical reading of this poem as apart from its anti-war stand brings out deep cultural memory of place and people. The phrase 'rumoring of air' is a poetic statement on the atmospheric crippling that war conducts in its routine exercises. But the young men in picture were actually unaware of their fate. Yet the poet uses words like 'roarer' and 'rumoring' as both convey discomforting interventions in the visible element of pastoral setting. The young men were:

Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,  
And still that valley has not changed its sound  
Though their faces are four decades under the ground. (CP 45)

This poem has a subjective background in Hughes's life. This is about a photograph of his father along with other young men who are now mere 'cenotaphs' in different parts of Yorkshire. The six young men on a Sunday outing, each as alive as any other human being – this is direct from the narrations of war experience of Hughes's father. He retold such episodes in Hughes's childhood several times. He would tell them, the man 'you confront', 'see hale', is not 'more alive', nor is 'fabulous beast' more dead than these soldiers. Since the intensity of life recorded in the photograph that continues in the picture has been terminated "And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud." (CP 46) They all died within six months and forty years ago:

To regard this photograph might well dement,  
Such contradictory permanent horrors here  
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out  
One's own body from its instant and heat. (CP 46)

These young men, six months later, succumbed to the horrors of war which exposed their bones. But the 'horrors' which indicate paradoxes of history and human existence are 'permanent' and can smile and stare upon the generation of the poet and subsequently of the readers in any region of world. This poem is Hughes's concretization of abstract feelings stored in his personal memory. Edward Hadley in his book *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* compares the idiom and treatment of temporality with "Ode on Grecian Urn":

Both poems consider the paradoxical nature of figures free from time, age and death but also how these figures are immovable from their temporal designation. This is also true of the photograph in Hughes' poem and the men featured in it. It is preservation with double effect; in addition to being an elegy for those in photograph, the poem is also a record of the photograph as much as those it depicts. (20)

Instead of using sentimental tone and phrases of the poem on grief over dead soldiers, he impersonalizes the background narrated by his father. No less important is the element of photographic reproduction and the imaginative space created through the lively and rhythmic presence of Calder valley or any setting the original picture was taken in.

The poem "Bayonet Charge" explores the themes of war from the perspective of a soldier charging into battle with a bayonet and it highlights the devastating impact that war can have on both human beings and the natural world. The poem portrays an infantry attack. Hughes's account beginning with "Suddenly woke and was running" (CP 43) captures the excitement, confusion, and terror of battle. As the soldier charges across the field, he begins to realize the destruction that war has wrought on the natural environment around him. He sees "a green hedge/That dazzled with the rifle fire . .

. Like a flame.” (CP 43) This image highlights the contrast between the beauty and vitality of the natural world and the destructive power of human conflict. The soldier also begins to feel a sense of detachment from his own body and from the world around him. He describes himself as being “bewildered by the jargon of courage/and the jargon of death,” suggesting that the language of war has become a kind of meaningless abstraction that obscures the reality of what is happening around him. In a desperate, irrational, self-sacrificing charge, the soldier, racing for his life and facing near-certain death, rushes toward the inadequate shelter of a green hedge:

King, honour, human dignity, etcetera  
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm  
To get out of that blue crackling air  
His terror’s touchy dynamite. (CP 43-44)

The explosion of bullets takes place both all around and inside him. Hughes portrayed the sufferings at the front as vividly and horrifically as possible. The cynical dismissal of king and country, used to justify the bloodshed. In war, man’s animalistic instincts render the notions of heroism and humor meaningless, leaving survival as his only priority. As a result of this, his rifle is numbed like a damaged arm, and the patriotic tears change into “molten iron”, and he is hung like a statuary in the midstride. Therefore, the poem portrays the dehumanizing effects of war and the individual’s struggle to maintain their humanity in the face of violence and destruction.

### 3. CONCLUSION

For Ted Hughes, as for the World War II poet Keith Douglas “war brought [Douglas’s] gift to maturity. In a sense, war was his ideal subject: the burning away of all human pretensions in the ray cast by death.” (qtd in Murray, Simplify, 28) In these war poems, Hughes conducted his own fierce campaign against hypocrisy, oppression, and the waste of human life. There was no idealistic disillusionment because, looking back, he was disillusioned from the very beginning. Unlike his father, he found solace and relief in his intense art, driven by emotion remembered with raw emotion. His cathartic poems depicted the impact of war on both the guilt-ridden survivors and their traumatized descendants. Hughes’s savage indignation helped him cope with the psychological wound that hurt him into poetry echoing Yeats’s memorable phrase. As Wilfred Owen wrote in the preface to his elegiac *Poems*, published posthumously by Siegfried Sassoon in 1920, “My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.” Hughes’s poems now resonate more forcefully than ever as we try to help the current wave of shell-shocked victims of the wars in Russia and Ukraine. The brutality of wars reflects the instinct and bloody side of modern people and modern society. All these poems not only indicate the environmental catastrophe of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but also provide a lens through which to view and contemplate the destructive potential of human behavior and its impact on the natural environment. Hughes’s poetry can help to reconnect readers with nature and offer a sense of solace in a world that is often dominated by technology and urbanization. His depictions of the natural world can evoke feelings of wonder and awe, reminding readers of the beauty and complexity of the natural world. By highlighting the interconnectedness of all living things and the delicate balance of ecosystems, Hughes’s poetics of environment provides relief to the sufferings of the 21st century by reconnecting readers with nature, raising awareness about environmental issues, and inspiring hope and resilience in the face of environmental crises.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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Abbreviation: *Collected Poems (CP)*