
UNIT 24 TED HUGHES

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24.0 OBJECTIVES

Having read the units you will able to:

- discuss Ted Hughes the poet
- demonstrate how Hughes is a nature poet of a different kind than the romantic poets
- examine “Hawk Roosting”
- analyze “The Thought-Fox”
- analyze “How to Paint a Water Lily”

24.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we will discuss Ted Hughes’s life in short, because Hughes’s life experiences particularly his association with nature and world of animals and birds in the rural England shaped his poetic sensibility. We will examine to what extent this claim could find evidence in his poems.

The first poem is “Hawk Roosting.” It is a dramatic monologue spoken by the hawk. The speaking voice uses precise imagery and a deliberate arrangement of sounds to convey a sense of absolute dominion that bird of prey holds over the world. You may read the poem slowly to discover the connection between the words, imagery, sound and the consciousness of the speaking voice.

The second poem is the celebrated “The Thought-Fox.” It is a poem about the writing of a poem. The poet imagines a fox in the darkness of a cold night outside, which becomes a metaphor for the poetic stirrings in the poet’s imagination. You will discover in the poem the poet’s great felicity with creating a moving image of the fox, and to leave an impression that the poem moves towards its finality as the fox moves inside the mind of the poet. You will also discover in this poem the exactness of imagery, and the relationship between the movement of the thoughts and the movement of sound pattern.

The third poem in this Unit is “How to Paint a Water lily.” The poem is about the painting of water lily although on the page of poetry. In this poem again, you will discover the contrary aspects of nature symbolized by the water lily.

It is advised that you read the poems first, and then read the parts of the Unit.

24.2 TED HUGHES (17 AUGUST 1930- 28 OCTOBER 1998)

Edward James Ted Hughes was one of the most influential English poets of the second half of the 20th century. He remained the poet laureate of England from 1984 till his death. He was also a writer of the books for children.

Ted Hughes was born on August 17, 1930 in Mytholmroyd, a small mill town in West Yorkshire. For the first seven years of his life, he lived on the moorland of that county. His early experiences of wind, rain, and hard stony hills shaped his impressions about a harsh world of nature. From a very early age, he was drawn to animals, and related to them. He observed in them tendencies of both being a predator and a prey, and it is in this respect that he used animals as symbols in his poems such as “The Hawk Roosting.” He viewed birds and animals as having unscrupulous instincts and menacing nature. In his poems, he associated the human nature with the ferocious nature of animals and predatory birds.

Hughes’s father, who was a carpenter and a shopkeeper, had been a soldier in the First World War. The memories of the war remained vivid to the poet since his early life. His experience of Yorkshire was also governed by his consciousness of the war, as he would later say that it was never possible for him to “escape the impression that the whole region is in mourning for the First World War.”

Hughes studied English literature, Archaeology, and Anthropology at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1954.

He had been writing poetry since his school days, but the university years came as a long period of hibernation in his creative life. In 1955 though he came across a Penguin book of contemporary American poets that left him greatly influenced, and inspired to write verse seriously. In this anthology he admired the works of John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Lowell among others. Some of his early influences were Yeats, Hopkins, T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas.

In 1956, he came across Sylvia Plath who was studying at Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. She fell in love with him, and thus began a very critical fellowship in poetry between the two distinguished poets. They shared their works, and encouraged each other. Soon they got married. In the same year, his

finished composing *The Hawk in the Rain* that Plath sent to a contest, the prize was publication by Harper. The judges were W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Marianne Moore. Hughes won the first prize, and the manuscript was published in 1957.

Hughes and Plath moved to the United States, and lived there for the next two years. They involved themselves in teaching and writing. In 1959, they returned to London. Their daughter Frieda was born on 1 April 1960. Their son Nicholas was born in January 1962. In June 1962, Plath met with a car accident, which was one of the many suicide attempts she tried, as she had been suffering from severe depression. The couple separated in 1962 over Hughes affair with Assia Wevill. In 1963, Plath committed suicide.

Hughes devoted himself to writing for children in different genres, translations, short stories, as well as poems.

Hughes published *Wodwo* in 1967. The poems were conspicuous for their precise and simple diction, and his use of free verse. *Crow* got published in 1970. The poems in this collection present a violent and a bloodier aspects of nature and animal life. The poems produce a surreal impression of the wildness of the predatory world of birds and animals in a language that is remarkably simple and direct. Hughes later said that the poems were resulted from his thoughts about the style of singing by a crow. He wondered that if a crow had to sing a song, its song will be without any music, it would be purely simple and starkly ugly. The poems present a world in which the moral universe has been subverted. The express physical pain, torture and suffering as a result of the murderous instinct inherent in the animals portrayed. But there is no moral dilemma. The murderousness of the world is accepted as a bare fact, as something necessary and responsive to basic instincts.

Moortown (1979) continue his poetic obsession with describing the life of animals in their true physical aspects. The poem “Birth of a Rainbow,” for example delineates the birth of a calf on a cold ridge in “razorish” wind. There is a hail storm, and the poor calf suffers the cold while draped in the blood of afterbirth.

Ted Hughes continued to describe the harsh and violent nature in his later volumes.

<p>Self-check Exercise I</p> <p>1) How did Hughes’s childhood in West Yorkshire shape his poetry?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
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2) Who were the American poets that influenced Hughes’s poetry?
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3) Who was Sylvia Plath? What role did she play in the making of Hughes as a poet?
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4) Apart from poetry, what else did Hughes write?
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24.3 THE THOUGHT-FOX

24.3.1 Introduction

“The Thought-Fox” appeared in the first collection of verse by Ted Hughes *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The poems in this collection were typed by Sylvia Plath, who thereafter entered the poems in a contest. The judges were W.H. Auden, Stephan Spender, and Marianne Moore. Hughes’s manuscript won the award, and the poet attained instant acclaim as the most original and exciting young voice in contemporary British poetry. “The Thought-Fox”, however, has been the most anthologized of not only the poems of this collection but of all his poems. The poem’s success lies in the simplicity of voice, imagery and diction, with which it unravels the secrets of poetic creation. In a brief moment of the creative process, the poem tracks the movement of the imaginary fox from nature into the mind of the poet, and then its impression on the printed page as a poem. In its unification of the human and animal, the poem presents the oneness of man and nature, human and animal, ferociousness and tenderness.

24.3.2 The Text

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
 Something else is alive
 Beside the clock's loneliness
 And this blank page where my fingers move

Through the window I see no star:
 Something more near
 Though deeper within darkness
 Is entering loneliness

Cold, delicately as the dark snow
 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
 Two eyes serve a movement, that now
 And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
 Between tress, and warily a lame
 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
 Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
 A widening deepening greenness
 Brilliantly, concentratedly
 Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
 It enters the dark hole of the head
 The window is starless still; the clock ticks
 The page is printed.

24.3.3 Analysis

The setting of the poem is a room, and the time is midnight. The poet sits at his writing desk by the open window; outside lies the starless and dark night. The poet looks into the darkness into the forest beyond the clearings. This act of looking into the external darkness propels the dark interiors of his imagination, which in degrees of imaginative clarity fashions forth a fox. It is as sensual, instinctual and bodily alive as the real fox. The fox of his mind, 'the thought-fox,' finally appears as the poem itself. The poem is about the writing of the poem itself.

In a 1961 BBC broadcast, Hughes talks about the writing process as "the special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind.... This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of life outside your own." In this poem, it is the fox that the poet pursues; he starts with a vague apprehension of its presence, but gradually there arrives clearer perceptions of its figure and movements, till it transfers itself as a whole creature into the mind of the poet, and appears on the page of the poem.

The poem opens in darkness on a “midnight’s moment.” There is utmost silence and loneliness all around, and is enhanced by the clock’s ticking. The poet sits moving his fingers on a blank piece of paper searching for a poem in his mind. The setting presents two contrary spaces. The poet sits inside his room, while outside his window lies the forest defined by darkness. The darkness symbolizes the inactivity of imagination before the beginning of the creative process. The poetic creation takes its root in the natural landscape outside the mind of the poet, somewhere in the forest, where the poet feels something is present.

However, as it becomes subsequently clear in the poem, the fox takes its shape and movement inside the mind of the poet.

In the second stanza, the poet sees no star in the sky, the traditional symbol of heavenly guidance:

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Entering loneliness

The poet has to search inwards for appropriate words to clearly realize the figure and movement of being still unidentified in the poem. However, there is more clarity compared to the first stanza. From “something else is alive” in the first stanza, the speaker notes the imagined animal as “something more near.” The word “something” in the two stanzas connotes both creative inspiration as well as the imagined animal. The unclear movement of the animal that the poet visualizes in the outside works as correlative of the vague stirrings of a poem not yet clearly formed. The poet avoids naming the animal at this stage, as wants to retain the vagueness of the inspiration, until a true discovery of the poetic form.

In the third stanza, the figure of the fox is still not clearly seen. Its presence is, however, more acutely felt:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow
A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;

The simile contains a visual and kinesthetic image. The poet has only see its dark nose touching the twig and the leaf as snow looking dark in darkness of the night falls touching them on the ground. The sense of coldness contained in this image suggests metaphoric coldness of the world of nature and animal. Next the poet sees the two eyes of the animal, now little clearer. The third and the fourth stanzas are syntactically joined by the eye movements of the fox that make the body of the fox appear more distinct:

Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between tress, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

The appearance of the two eyes within the deep darkness of the snow and trees communicate an eerie feeling. The image serves to suddenly unfold the scary reality of the animal lurking in darkness. The vagueness about it is turning into

exactness of a fox. The last two lines of the third stanza and the first line of the fourth stanza convey through rapidness of rhythm the nervous movements of the fox, and sudden excitement felt by the poet as he perceives the fox setting its paw's prints on the snow in between the trees. There is sudden twist to the rhyme, rhythm and sound pattern to convey the discovery of the fox. The word 'now' appears twice as end rhyme suggests an attainment of clarity in the poet's consciousness about the fox. It also serves to introduce an element of surprise involved in discovery the first true signs of the fox. The repetition of the phrase "and now" provides speed to the rhythm of the poem as the poet almost correctly the animal. The poet is almost certain of its figure as it lurks there in darkness. The line

Sets neat prints into the snow

suggests by its short half-rhyming sounds of the first three words a suspense that achieves clarity as the line settles finally in the vowel prominent sound of "snow." The phrase "lame shadow" in the next line provides the first fuller picture of the fox, and "bold to come" suggests that the fox is lurking on the outer edges of the forest ready to leap inside.

The phrase "across clearing" in the first line of the fifth stanza serves as a definite breaking point in the poem as well as the scene outside imagined by the poet. The fox breaks through to full realization with its leap and descends on the imagination of the poet as well as the reader:

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness
Brilliantly, concentratedly
Coming about its own business

The lengthening of diction "widening, deepening, greenness" suggests how close the fox stands to the poet and the reader. The two eyes of the previous stanzas have merged into single "greenness" that has grown wider and deeper as the fox comes near us as well as the poet.

The last stanza presents such close perception of the fox. It appears so close that we along with the poet can smell its "sudden sharp stink." Its sensuality is so fully realized in us; its smell affects our consciousness. The fox almost literally enters the head of the poet as if it was entering its den. And thereafter appears on the page as poem. The fox is the poem. The long line of the poem finally finds a full stop in the last line, as the picture of the fox becomes real in the page of the poem.

The poem is about poetry, how the perception of the fox attained with powerful immediacy attains its language, its form. The fox is in the mind of the poet rather than outside it. The gap between the external and internal dissolves in the consciousness of the poet. Ted Hughes wrote about this poem, "...long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time any one reads it, the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness, and come walking towards them" (*Poetry in the Making* 1967)

Self-check Exercise II

1) What does the fox symbolize in this poem?

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2) What does the darkness of the forest stand for in this poem?

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3) What is the theme of the poem “Thought-fox”?

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4) How would assess Hughes’s poetic technique in this poem?

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24.4 HAWK ROOSTING

24.4.1 Introduction

The poem is a dramatic monologue delivered by the hawk, a bird of prey, who remorselessly reveals its violent instinct and character in an arrogant tone. A dramatic monologue is a form of poetry, in which a single speaker, who is not the poet, presents the whole poem in the form of his speech. He speaks in a specific context at a critical moment. The person who is spoken to in the poem is not revealed. The reader can infer the responses of the listener from the speech of the single speaker. The main interest of the poem lies in the fact that during the course of his speech, the speaker reveals his character, behavior and attitude

almost unwittingly. The best practitioner of dramatic monologue in English poetry was the Victorian poet, Robert Browning, who wrote some memorable poems in this form such as “My Last Duchess,” “Fra Lippo Lippi,” “Porphyria’s Lover” etc.

“Hawk Roosting” is one of the most celebrated poems of Ted Hughes, in which the poet has used dramatic monologue to expose a despotic and murderous nature symbolized by the hawk. The poem was first published in 1960. It is from the volume *Lupercal* (1960).

24.4.2 The Text

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air’s buoyancy and the sun’s ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth’s face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

24.4.3 Analysis

As you will observe in the all three poems by Hughes, the experience contained in the poems is spoken with a directness that surprises due to morally complex nature of the content. In this poem, the hawk expresses no guilt about its murderous instinct. It is proudly rapacious. Given its superior physical abilities, it kills at will.

The first stanza begins the Hawk’s monologue in a plain voice. He is perched on the top of the forest feeling self-possessed with his eyes closed in contemplation of his absolute control of the world of birds and animals he preys upon. The

punctuation in the second line conveys a directness of tone that runs till the fourth line of the stanza, and conveys an unfazed murderous intent:

Inaction, no falsifying dream
.....
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat

The hawk indulges in no false dream; it kills with precision and at will and eats his prey. The visual imagery in the third line links the precision to kill which is inherent in the instinct of the hawk with the precise make up of his body that makes it possible to transform the instinct into murderous action:

..... no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

The use of the words “head” and “feet” makes personification implicit in the poem, and so the poem may also be read as reflecting the guiltless murderous instinct in the humans. The hawk uses its “hooked head and hooked feet”

In the second stanza, the hawk speaks about his firm grip over the earth; it can choose to kill at will, as it possesses both the advantage of the height of the trees as well as its natural power of menacing flight that can utilize both the “air’s buoyancy” and “the sun’s ray” to glide down and kill its victims. The stanza uses a polysyllabic word in each line: “convenience,” “buoyancy,” “advantage,” and “inspection.” As an abstract diction, these words convey ruthless ferocity of the hawk beyond rational and moral constraint. He symbolizes nature in its full nakedness of an urge to kill. The words also convey a militaristic attitude, as the hawk exudes:

And the earth’s face upward for my inspection

The pride of the hawk attains its apotheosis in the third stanza, as it feels godlike control over the earth. The first line of this stanza still presents the hawk perched the tree like the first lines of the previous stanzas. The power of its “hooked feet” is evident in their ability to be “locked upon the rough bark.” There is a rhetorical declaration of supremacy, as the hawk declares:

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

The hawk exudes with pride at being a special creation of Nature. In its coming to being, in the making of its “foot” and “feather,” as if the whole “Creation” participated. There is no hyperbole intended in this assertion of the hawk. There is no ambiguity in its voice that it holds the Creation under subjection.

In stanzas fourth and fifth, the most pernicious aspect its power is unfolded. It holds its sway over all creation, and kills at will, because all its own. There is no refinement, not hint of civilization about the body and the behavior of the hawk:

There is no sophistry in my body
My manners are tearing off heads

The two stanzas are syntactically linked. The physical brutishness expressed in the last line of the fourth stanza “tearing off heads” settles with the godlike

decision of fate of the victim uttered in the first line of the fifth stanza:

The allotment of death

The last three lines of the fifth stanza complete the merciless killing instinct of the hawk:

For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The hawk is beyond the arguments of reason or moral law. It lives a life of predation, and symbolizes the Darwinian law. It lives by killing in the most brutal fashion.

The sixth stanza shifts the scene from the brutal killing to that of self-definition, although the whole poem can be read as long self-definition. However, the last stanza brings back the calm declarative tone of the first stanza. The sun is reduced to play the background to the hawk. It rules the world with scary calmness that hides its menacing and death-giving instinct. Since its creation, it has not hold of the creation through the power of its 'eye':

Nothing has changed since I began.
My eyes has permitted no change.
I am going to keep thing like this.

The poem uses the same vocabulary as that of a typical nature poem. It contains references to 'wood,' 'trees,' 'air,' 'sun' etc. It also refers to God, the creator of nature. However, the poem is anything but a nature poem you can associate with a romantic poet like Wordsworth or Keats. The poem presents a world of nature shockingly antithetical to the benign image of nature expected in such a poem. It's a nature ruled over by the predatory power of the hawk, whose chief instinct is to brutally kill and eat its prey, while subduing each aspect of nature to its design as a God, although a god who allots death.

Self-check Exercise III

1) What does the hawk symbolize in this poem?

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2) What is the form of the poem?

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3) How is Hughes’s “Hawk Roosting” a nature poem?
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4) Write some of the features of the hawk as described by Hughe in this poem?
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24.5 HOW TO PAINT A WATER LILY

24.5.1 Introduction

The poem “How to Paint a Water Lily” was published in the year 1960. It is also titled as “To Paint a Water Lily.” Both the titles express an artist’s struggle to transmute nature, natural objects, birds and animals on to the page of a poem. This struggle is central to so many of Hughes’s poem, such as the poem “The Thought-Fox” that you have already read in this unit. The first title “How to Paint a Water Lily,” the title that we have retained, reads as if the poet is advising “how to pant a water lily.”

24.5.2 The Text

A green level of lily leaves
Roofs the pond’s chamber and paves

The flies’ furious arena: study
These, the two minds of this lady.

First observe the air’s dragonfly
That eats meat, that bullets by

Or stands in space to take aim;
Others as dangerous comb the hum

Under the trees. There are battle-shouts
And death-cries everywhere hereabouts

But inaudible, so the eyes praise
To see the colours of these flies

Rainbow their arcs, spark, or settle
Cooling like beads of molten metal

Through the spectrum. Think what worse
Is the pond-bed's matter of course;

Prehistoric bedragoned times
Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

Have evolved no improvements there,
Jaws for heads, the set stare,

Ignorant of age as of hour-
Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
As a painting, trembling hardly at all

Though the dragonfly alight,
Whatever horror nudge her root.

24.5.3 Glossary

Spectrum : rays of color such as seen in a rainbow, but produced by separating the components of light by their different degrees of refraction determined by wavelength.

24.5.4 Analysis

The poem presents a set of pictures that evoke the beauty of nature both in its violent activity and in calmness. Hughes's main philosophy as a poet is not simply to describe the outer beauty of nature, not even to uncover its life within that corresponds with the human feelings, as the romantic poets such as Wordsworth do in their poems. For him nature is as complex in its possession of both beauty and terror, as a human being is deep within, and he seeks to portray this essential duality of existence in his poems.

The speaking voice in the poem attempts to capture the visual image of a water lily on a canvas, even as he encounters the wildness and violence of nature surrounding the lily in the form of swift and warring flights and activities of the dragonfly and other flies. The water lily suggests two contrary aspects of nature- the surface of the pond on which a cluster of lily flower floats appears quiet, soothing and peaceful, but beneath this quietness lie the disturbing activities of nature symbolized by the battling flies. This duality of the nature is shown by the division between the life associated with the lily flowers, and the strife involving the flies surrounding them as well as under the water surface of the pond.

The poet is an artist, and is charmed about the beauty and serenity symbolized by the water lily. However, his mind is distracted by the striking complexities and 'war-like' situation making the atmosphere that surround the water lily.

The poem contains thirteen two line-stanzas with irregular rhymes. The shortness of stanzas suggests that the poem is a record of momentous thoughts as the poet

observes the water lily and the ambience around it. The irregularity of the rhyme suggests the diversity of experience marked by beauty and violence seen in nature.

The poem begins with a precise visual image so characteristic of the style of Hughes. The precision of the image produces a painting-like effect:

A green level of lily leaves
Roofs the pond's chamber and paves

The flies' furious arena: study
These, the two minds of this lady.

In these two stanzas, the poet perceives the water lily in splendor and beauty, however soon intervened by observation of the "flies' furious arena." The poet is so arrested by the beauty of a cluster of lily flowers that he sees them as one "green level" roofing the surface of the pond, as if they were sheltering "the pond's chamber." The water lily in itself symbolizes nature in its beautiful and nurturing aspect. However, the mention of the 'furious arena' of the flies that the water lilies help build introduce the terrifying aspect of nature that the poet will develop subsequently.

What is remarkable here is the use of personification. The fourth line of the poem personifies the water lily as a 'lady' with two minds. These "two minds" refer to the two opposite aspects of nature as a creator as well as a destroyer.

The third stanza justifies the title of the poem. The use of the imperative "first observe" serves as a direction for a painter:

First observe the air's dragonfly
That eats meat, that bullets by
Or stands in space to take aim;

There is a similar direction suggesting "how to paint a water lily" in the eighth stanza:

Think what worse
Is the pond-bed's matter of course;

Though the poet is writing a verse and not making a painting; his poetry is known for translating the images from the world of nature directly on to the page of poetry. It is the complexity of nature that would make it extremely challenging to achieve that end.

The next three stanzas make clearer why painting the water lily is going to be a difficult task. The darker side of nature becomes more evident, and poses the challenging of presenting a simple picture of nature as that of human beings. Naturally, the abrupt change in thought is accompanied by a change in the tone of the poem. The poet leaves behind the serene and gentle images of lilies, and turns to the violent pictures of the dragonfly which "eats meat" and aims at insects to kill them for its food. Like the hawk in the poem "Hawk Roosting," the dragonfly is a predator targeting victims. In these stanzas there is no description of the water lily. The poem focuses entirely on war like activities of nature. Violence is

aply suggested by the poem's diction. The poet's brilliant use of the compound words such as death-cries', 'battle-shout' as well as the use of nouns as verb such as "bullets by" suggest rapid action of the battle-fields and the horror that they evoke.

The cries and shouts of the battlefield of flies may be inaudible, yet the heightened sensibility of the poet is able to perceive the activity produced by and producing the violence prevalent in nature. Again, as if advising a painter, he recommends seeing the changing colors of the flies forming the rainbow arcs and sparkling- actions suggestive of violent activity. The poet employs juxtaposition of images reminiscent of the metaphysical poets like Donne in the following simile:

...or settle
Cooling like beads of molten metal

The juxtaposition of 'molten' and 'metal', fluid and hard metal again symbolizes the dual aspects of nature- soothing and harsh.

The poet next suggests the even more sinister aspect of nature by indicating the ruthless violence that takes place below the surface of the pond, which gets linked to the mindless killings and wars across human history right from the prehistoric times, marked by the Roman times, and continuing up to the present moment in history- violence has been universal.

Prehistoric bedragoned times
Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

Have evolved no improvements there,
Jaws for heads, the set stare,

However, as art itself, the water lily has been oblivious of the moral distinction between good and evil, the benign and malevolent. It exists symbolizing both aspects of existence across time and history:

Ignorant of age as of hour-
Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
As a painting, trembling hardly at all

The use of hyphenation in 'long-necked lily-flower' is suggestive of coexistence of the two worlds-the world of beauty and fragility and that of violence. As nature exists in its timelessness, so the water lily will exist in poem without any fear of 'trembling'.

The poem ends in duality as it had begun.

As you must have observed during your reading of the poem, and this analysis, the poem makes good use of visual and auditory images. The sound pattern is very rhythmic throughout, though there are necessary variations. The contrast inherent in the very essence of the nature is very thoughtfully and imaginatively captured by the poet in the image of the water lily, and presented in his arrangement of words and sounds in the poem.

Self-check Exercise IV

1) How does the poet describe nature in its simplicity and calmness?

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2) How does the poet depict nature in its violence?

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3) How does the poet portray the two worlds of the water lily?

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4) How do you find the language and the structure of the poem?

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24.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you read about the life and works of Ted Hughes, and analyzed three of his poems. All the three poems, “Thought-Fox,” “Hawk Roosting,” and “How to Paint a Water Lily” suggest a definite break in the post-World War English poetry. They suggest a return to nature and the rural life as subjects of poetry. But they also introduce a new perspective. They present nature as violent, merciless, and destructive echoing the baseness of human instincts. They also introduce simplicity and directness to English poetry.

We hope you will more of Ted Hughes from anthologies of modern poetry or the various collections of his poetry.

24.7 ANSWER TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

- 1) Growing up in the rural Yorkshire, as a young boy Hughes was fascinated with the birds, animals, and the natural landscape, which shaped his poetic sensibility. He was drawn towards the wild and predatory habits and instincts of the animals, and the poet saw in them a reflection of the deeper psychic realities of the human beings.
- 2) Among the American poets to influence to Ted Hughes were John Crowe Ransom and Robert Lowell.
- 3) Sylvia Plath was a major American poet, who was married to Ted Hughes. She played a major role in the making of Ted Hughes, especially in his formative years. She typed the poems of his first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), and made useful suggestions to improve his verse. She was also instrumental in getting this work published.
- 4) Ted Hughes wrote literature for children, radio plays, as well as some translations.

Self-Check Exercise II

- 1) The fox symbolizes the poem itself. It takes birth as a formless intuition in the consciousness of the poet, but this consciousness is reflected in the darkness of the night in the forest outside his room. Initially, the thought or the idea of the fox appears formless and vague, but as the poem proceeds it slowly starts taking shape and structure, and attains full and immediate clarity in the last stanza.
- 2) The darkness of the forest outside the room of the poet stands for the inactive state of the poetic imagination, just before the beginning of the creative process. It suggests the potential stage of creative imagination.
- 3) The theme of the poem is coming into being of a poem itself. The poem captures the moments of creative process by suggesting an analogy of the 'thought-fox' - the idea of fox that stirs in the mind of the poet reflected in the dark night outside the room of the poet. As the fox becomes clear in the forest outside, the poem attains clarity in the poet's mind, till it is finally printed on the paper. The dark world outside and the poet's room suggest a connection between nature and man.
- 4) The poem is composed in a simple diction with directness of tone. The poet has used common words such as 'room', 'paper', 'forest', 'fox', 'tree' etc., but they generate evocative meanings. The images are sharp and precise, for example, the fox taking shape in the darkness, and the 'eyes' of the fox staring in the dark that suggest beauty and terror at the same time.

Self-Check Exercise III

- 1) The hawk symbolizes nature in its savagery and brutality. The hawk is an animal which is known for its predatory instinct. The hawk is proud of his control over the lives of its preys, which makes him very superior and arrogant.

- 2) The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. The use of this poetic form coheres well with the subject of the poem, which is to show the authoritative and self-centered attitude of the hawk. Since dramatic monologue is narrated by a single speaker, it gives the power of control to the speaker who holds full command over his thoughts and ideas, as well as the silent listener.
- 3) “Hawk Roosting” is a nature poem. The poem is full of natural imagery and diction. Use of words like, ‘wood’, ‘tree’, ‘earth’, ‘sky’, ‘perch’, ‘air’, ‘god’, ‘creation’ all convey the naturalistic diction, tone and mood of the poem. However, the poem is about nature in a very different way than the romantic poems of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It portrays nature in its savagery and violence.
- 4) Hughes portrays the hawk as arrogant, self-centered, and proud. Expressions such as “I hold creation in my food”, “allotment of death”, “my eyes has permitted no change” convey the despotic attitude of the Hawk. It is violent, brutal, and merciless.

Self-Check Exercise IV

- 1) The poet describes the nature in its simplicity and calmness in the very first stanza of the poem in the image of the ‘green lily leaves’ that provide shade to the open surface of the pond’s water. The very use of the color ‘green’ indicates the nurturing and productive aspect of the nature.
- 2) The violent aspect of the nature is portrayed in the image of the dragonfly as a predator running after its victims. The use of phrases such as ‘bullets by’, ‘battle-shouts’, and ‘death-cries’ shows nature as a battleground- very gloomy, dark and furious.
- 3) The two worlds of the water lily is portrayed by the poet in the form of the life above and below the water surface of the pond in which the water lily grows, as well as the atmosphere surrounding it. On the surface everything appears very quiet and calm, suggesting the outward simplicity of the nature at first sight. On the other hand, beneath the water surface, as well as in area around the flowers, things are very chaotic and menacing, suggesting the destructive aspect of the nature.
- 4) The language as well as the structure of the poem reflects its content. Hughes’s language is very sensitive in terms of its auditory and visual effect. The use of new linguistic devices and punctuations brilliantly sets the tone and the mood of the poem. Flooded with evocative images, symbols and metaphors, the poem conveys the duality of nature in a very appealing and thoughtful way. As far as the structure is concerned, the poem consists of 13 couplets with a regular rhyme, though with some exceptions to introduce variations in meaning in tandem with the variation in the rhythm of the poem.