# Hawk Roosting

## SUMMARY

I, a hawk, sit at the top of the forest with my eyes shut. I'm doing nothing, holding no false dreams between my head's curved beak and the curved talons of my feet. In my sleep, I dream about killing my prey perfectly and eating them.

The trees are so well-suited to my way of being! The air I float on and the sun's light seem perfectly adapted to my way of life, and the earth faces the sky so I can inspect it.

My feet are gripped tightly to the branch. It took millions of years to make my foot, and every single feather. Sometimes, I hold other products of Creation in my foot when I catch them.

Other times I soar high into the sky, revolving the world around me as I spiral up in slow circles. I kill when and where I want, because the world belongs to me. I have no use for clever but false logical thinking: my politeness is ripping the heads off my prey—

That's how death gets dished out. And my one true way takes me straight through life, causing others to die. I need no logical justifications for my actions.

I fly between the earth and the sun, and it has always been this way. My gaze has not allowed anything to changed. I will keep things like this forever.

## THEMES

### NATURE AND VIOLENCE

In "Hawk Roosting," Ted Hughes imagines the interior thoughts of one of the great birds of prey: the hawk. The poem is told entirely from the perspective of the hawk, which is personified as having the powers of conscious thought and a command of English. What the hawk lacks, however, are human qualities like mercy and remorse: it is ruthless and direct in its thoughts about hunting prey, though this violence is presented matter-of-factly, as simply part of who the hawk is. Imagining what goes on in the mind of the hawk facilitates a deeper meditation about nature, which the poem presents as both majestic and fearsome. Violence, the poem suggests, is just as much a part of nature as is beauty, and the natural world isn't subject to human notions of morality.

The hawk is a killer, and part of the poem's aim is to make clear just how natural this violence is. To that end, the opening line depicts the hawk sitting at the "top of the wood," symbolizing its place at the top of its ecosystem. And the poem is graphic in its depiction of the bird's violence throughout—the hawk refers to its "Manners" as "tearing off heads" and its flight path as "direct / Through the bones of the living." The hawk's life is literally governed the "allotment of death." In other words, it is *meant* to kill.

The hawk knows this, and comments on the way that nature seems to be perfectly designed to facilitate the hawk's hunting. Nature is "of advantage to me," it says, and describes itself as the product of "the whole of Creation." "Creation" here refers to both nature and the entirety of existence, while also alluding to a religious worldview. This religious element is relevant to the poem because much of human morality is based on or informed by religion (and vice versa). The mention of Creation speaks to the hawk's prowess, but also to the incredible way that nature evolves to create the conditions for its creatures to flourish—even if those same creatures are essentially killing machines.

The hawk insists upon its rightful place within the natural order by describing the prey that it holds "in my foot" as part of "Creation" too. The hawk understands that both it and its prey have their roles to play, even if one seems easier to stomach than the other. In other words, the hawk's capacity for violence is as natural as things that seem more innocent: flowers or puppies, for example!

This understanding that killing and violence are an integral part of nature informs the hawks' attitude and personality. It rejects human understanding and morality, claiming that it has no need for "falsifying dream[s]" or "sophistry." Sophistry is the use of clever but false arguments, which the hawk, acting in accordance with its true nature, has no need for. As such, humans are wrong to project their moral frameworks—especially the equation of violence with evil—onto the natural world. Nature, insists the hawk, is governed by its own laws.

That's why the hawk has only "one path"; it's one true way is that of a killer—killing *is* its nature. And that's why the hawk states that "Nothing has changed since I began [...] I am going to keep things like this." Its way of being is innate and natural, and it will continue to be this way, stoking fear in the hearts of its prey. The poem, then, explores nature by focusing on one small part of it, the hawk. Through giving voice to the hawk, the poem insists on the way in which nature is both miraculous *and* violent. It argues that violence and innocence, in the natural world at least, coexist in balance—and that human moral frameworks don't really apply accurately to creatures like the hawk.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-24

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*I sit in ...*
*... kills and eat.*

The poem begins by launching straight into the hawk's interior monologue. The hawk is personified throughout the poem, given capacity for thought, language, and expression. This leads to a kind of contradiction that runs through the poem: the hawk's killing nature is beyond human reasoning, and yet the poem can only express this nature *through human language*.

The hawk sits at the "top of the wood," surveying its kingdom. Similarly, as a bird of prey, it sits at the top of the food chain, and its high vantage point represents this superiority. Its closed eyes capture the way in which it inhabits its nature completely—it is at ease with itself, acting instinctively. The end-stop at the end of line 1 reinforces the way in which the hawk will act only when it feels it needs to—it won't be hurried by anything else.

The caesura after "inaction" creates a similar pause to the end-stop, carrying the same connotations. Here, the hawk starts drawing a distinction between the way that it thinks and the way that humans do. It indulges in no "falsifying dream"—it sees the world according to its true nature—implicitly criticizing the way that humanity imposes a false morality on the idea of violence. In this poem, violence isn't evil, it's just a normal part of the hawk's world. The diacope and alliteration in "hooked head" and "hooked feet" emphasizes the sharpness of the parts of the hawk's body, suggesting its violent nature. In line 4, the hawk states how it sometimes "rehearse[s] perfect kills and eat[s]" when it sleeps. Even in dreams, then, the hawk inhabits its true nature.

### LINES 5-8

*The convenience of ...*
*... for my inspection*

The second stanza sees the hawk offering its thoughts about the way that nature seems perfectly calibrated to suit its killing instinct. Almost ecstatically, line 5 uses apostrophe to celebrate the hawk's position at the "top of the wood," as it exclaims, "The convenience of the high trees!" It's as if the hawk suddenly addresses nature itself. The trees work well for the hawk, because it hides in them and waits till it spies its prey.

Likewise, the "air's buoyancy and the sun's ray" provide the hawk with an "advantage." The air allows the hawk to fly, and the sun allows it to spot its prey. This section is all about the equilibrium (the balance) of the natural world, which at once seems infinitely complex but also remarkably simple. Nature's different elements function in harmony. The poem's point, of course, is that the hawk's killer instinct is part of this harmony, not something separate. The enjambment between lines 6 and 7 creates a breezy easiness in the middle of the stanza, capturing the hawk's ability to fly wherever it wants.

Line 8 sees the hawk characterizing the "earth's face" as being "upward for [its] inspection." As with other lines in the poem, this imbues the hawk with a kind of arrogant entitlement based on its superiority in the ecosystem. The hawk feels like it is the boss of its world, the ultimate authority over everything below. Ironically, then, the hawk is portrayed as a kind of God-like figure even while the rest of the poem seems to undermine the "falsifying" morality of the Christian tradition.

### LINES 9-12

*My feet are ...*
*... in my foot*

The third stanza is an intriguing one, with the hawk reflecting on how it came to be the way that it is. Its feet are "locked upon the rough bark" because it is in a state of preparedness, ready to swoop down and pounce on its prey when the moment comes. This carries with it a violent threat, like a "locked" and loaded gun. As with the first lines of the preceding two stanzas, line 9 is also end-stopped, again creating the sense that the hawk is poised but unhurried.

Lines 10-12 describe the hawk's relationship with "Creation," which, by virtue of its capitalization, seems to intentionally allude to the Christian Creation myth. The hawk describes how it took "the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather." The allusion is important because the poem is drawing a distinction between human morality, which in the West is largely informed by Christianity, and the natural laws that govern the hawk's behavior. This line can equally apply to the science of evolution—the hawk is the result of all the changes that nature has been through over millions of years. In a way, it sees itself as the pinnacle of this process. The singling out of the "foot" and "each feather" is a way of pointing the reader towards the hawk's perfection, how it is so well-suited to its hunting instinct.

Line 12 repeats two words from earlier in the stanza: "Creation" and "foot." The first is an example of antanaclasis (when a word is repeated but with a different meaning) because now "Creation" refers not just to the process that made the hawk but to the prey that the hawk holds in its claws too. This again points towards a kind of natural law in which all animals—both the violent ones and the victims of that violence—are part of nature's beauty. This repetition also shows the hawk's power; the fact that it can "hold Creation" reinforces its sense of superiority. The repetition of "foot"—which is diacope—is interesting because the foot goes from being a body part at rest to a kind of deadly weapon, underscoring the hawk's violent power. The enjambment at the end of line 12 sets up the next stanza, conveying the hawk's sense of freedom.

## LINES 13-16

*Or fly up, ...*
*... off heads -*

Line 13 continues the phrase begun in line 12, picking up on the latter's enjambment across the stanzas:

> Now I hold Creation in my foot
> Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -

The enjambment across the stanzas indicates the hawk's freedom, the way in which it is totally in its element. Line 13 uses the slow-sounding consonance of /l/ sounds to portray the hawk as taking its time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Line 14—"I kill where I please because it is all mine"—expands on the hawk's attitude of superiority. It sees the world as "all mine." If a human was to utter this kind of statement, it would seem both inaccurate and arrogant. But the whole point here is that this sense of entitlement is part of the hawk's natural way of being—it behaves this way instinctively because that is its nature. Lines 15 and 16 develop this distinction between the hawk's behavior and the inapplicability of human thought in understanding the hawk's nature:

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

"Sophistry" (clever but inaccurate thought) and "manners" belong to human morality, and don't apply to the laws of nature. The hawk is not interested in questioning the way that it behaves, but only in fulfilling what comes naturally. The brutality of "tearing off heads" makes this a stark and shocking moment. In the undercurrent of the poem, though, is humanity's *own* capacity for violence. Humans have certainly torn off a few heads, both literally and metaphorically. A complicated question hangs over the poem: how should humans perceive their own capacity for violence, and how can they reconcile that with the Christian idea that violence is inherently evil?

## LINES 17-20

*The allotment of ...*
*... assert my right:*

The fourth stanza develops the idea that the hawk acts in accordance with natural law. "The allotment of death" in line 17 is a way of describing how the hawk "allots" death to its prey—the word means something like "administer" or, more colloquially, "dish out." An "allotment" can also be a small plot of land that people own and work. This implies a sense of ownership for the hawk too (who says in the previous stanza, "it is all mine"). The end-stop in line 17 makes this a tense and foreboding line.

Lines 18 to 20 offer a neat and accurate summary of the way that the hawk is presented throughout the poem:

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

In other words, the hawk's singular, natural purpose is to kill. The use of "one" here is important; it implies that the hawk has *one* true nature, and that everything it does expresses this natural law. It exists to kill—and it will. "No arguments assert [its] right" because it doesn't need the world of human logic to justify its actions. Additionally, the enjambment between lines 18 and 19 gives the phrase a feeling of directness, as though it is overpowering any need for punctuation or pause.

## LINES 21-24

*The sun is ...*
*... things like this.*

The final stanza discusses the way that the hawk has never "changed," will not "change," and intends to "keep things like this." In other words, this section is about a kind of permanence. Of course, this is not the way that nature actually works: species come and go out of existence. But the hawk—in this poem at least—is so dominant that it seems almost impossible that this kind of fate could ever come about.

Line 21 sees the hawk state that "The sun is behind me." This creates a striking visual image of the hawk existing between the sun and earth. The mention of a planetary body (the sun) lends a cosmic scale to this final stanza, making the hawk seem somehow destined to occupy this place in the world—an idea that has been played with throughout the poem. This image also emphasizes how dangerous the hawk is to other creatures. In fact, it's interesting to note that humans have an inbuilt reflex to turn around when a cloud goes across the sun. This is thought to be based on a reaction to a potential threat from above or behind, including from birds of prey. Regardless of this reflex's origin, the hawk's position between the sun and earth means that it casts a shadow below, indicating its mysterious and threatening power.

Line 23 again reinforces the idea that the hawk has agency over its entire world: "My eye has permitted no change." Again, this portrays is it as a kind of godlike figure surveying its kingdom. Indeed, the poem concludes on this note, with the hawk insisting it is "going to keep things like this." Of course, the hawk doesn't actually have godlike powers—but this suggestion speaks to the powers that it *does* have, namely the ability to administer death to its prey, soaring above the world while looking down on what awaits below. The end-stops throughout this stanza also contribute to its air of finality and authority.

# POETIC DEVICES

## ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used to strong effect in "Hawk Roosting." The first example is in the /h/ sounds of line 3:

> Between my **h**ooked **h**ead and **h**ooked feet:

The /h/ sounds give dramatic force to the image, and require quite a lot of effort in terms of the reader's breath (each /h/ requires exhalation). This alliteration makes the image more vivid, emphasizing the hooked shapes of the hawk, and carries with it a quiet sense of violence.

Another strong example is in lines 11 and 12, this time with an /f/ sound:

> To produce my **f**oot, my each **f**eather:
> Now I hold Creation in my **f**oot

This stanza talks about the process of "Creation" that has gone into making the hawk such an effective killer. The patterning of the /f/ sound suggests precision and helps the reader focus on the hawk's individual parts, all of which work in accordance to the bird's innate nature, producing a deadly killing machine.

Other instances of alliteration are more subtle, as in the phrase "**a**llotment **o**f death" in line 17, in which the /uh/ sound is quietly repeated. Other times, alliteration happens in the blink of an eye, as in the phrase "**it i**s all mine" in line 14 and the phrase "**M**y **m**anners." All these examples point to alliteration as a means of binding lines together, the tightly wound sounds mimicking the hawk's finely tuned body.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "h," "h," "h"
- **Line 6:** "a"
- **Line 8:** "f," "f"
- **Line 11:** "m," "f," "m," "f"
- **Line 12:** "m," "f"
- **Line 13:** "f"
- **Line 14:** "I," "I," "i," "i"
- **Line 15:** "i," "i"
- **Line 16:** "M," "m"
- **Line 17:** "a," "o"
- **Line 19:** "Th," "th," "th"
- **Line 24:** "th," "th"

## ALLUSION

The poem makes one allusion, which is found in the third stanza. Here, lines 10 and 12 refer to "Creation:"

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

The capitalization is significant here, marking out the word "Creation" as a reference to the creation myth central to the Christian religion. In Genesis 1:20, God creates the creatures of the world:

> And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that hath life, and fowl *that* may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

Thus, according the Bible, God himself gave the hawk a place in the sky.

The poem has a complicated relationship to this myth. On the one hand, the Christian story is a useful way of conceiving the world and placing the hawk in context. The hawk is a product of "Creation" (in fact, it took the "whole of Creation" to make the hawk!). Furthermore, the prey that it kills is *also* a part of "Creation." Thus, the Christian creation myth provides a way of understanding how all animals are connected as elements of "Creation."

On the other hand, this allusion is somewhat ironic. The poem stresses keenly throughout that the hawk is *outside* of human morality and reasoning. However, human morality is often connected with religion. Particularly, Western morality and Christianity often go hand-in-hand. Yet the poem seems to take issue with the Christian assertion that violence is evil (as in the sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill"). The hawk is literally *born* to kill, and killing is simply in its nature—yet the poem doesn't depict it as evil.

So, the allusion *isn't* necessarily claiming that God made the world, but rather that each creature has its place in the design of nature, regardless of whether its actions seem innocent or evil to humans.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 10:** "Creation"
- **Line 12:** "Creation"

## ANTANACLASIS

Antanaclasis (the repetition of a word in which the word's meaning changes), occurs once in "Hawk Roosting," in the third stanza:

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

Here, the two "Creation[s]" mean something slightly different

from one another. The first refers to the process of Creation—which can either be interpreted as relating to the Christian story of how God made the world, or more simply as meaning the natural process of evolution that has resulted in the hawk's existence. Either way, this asks the reader to focus on the way in which the hawk's suitability to its environment—and its talent for inflicting death—seem like the result of millennia of careful deliberation and improvements. The hawk mentions its foot and "each feather," claiming each individual body part to be a kind of marvel.

The second "Creation" refers to something more external to the hawk. Whereas the first use referred to the process of creation, this use refers to the *result*. In this sense, the whole world can be thought of as creation. The poem's meaning here relates to the hawk's prey—a mouse, for example. Not only is the hawk the product of "Creation," but it can also exert its power over "Creation" too. Like a god, it can literally hold "Creation" in its hands (technically feet!).

**Where Antanaclasis appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-12:** "It took the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather: / Now I hold Creation in my foot"

## APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is used just once in "Hawk Roosting." It occurs in line 5:

> The convenience of the high trees!

An apostrophe is when the speaker addresses someone or something that isn't present. Here, the personified hawk seems to address the trees, and perhaps nature as a whole. The hawk sounds almost ecstatic or rapturous. As though granted the powers of self-reflection, complex thought, and language, the hawk considers how well-suited it is to its environment—and vice versa. Nature seems perfectly calibrated to enable the hawk's way of life, from the layout of the trees, to the air, the sun, and the hawk's own body. The "high trees" provide the perfect vantage point for the hawk from which to spot, target, and kill its prey.

As a device, apostrophe is particularly mannered and theatrical—it's not a natural way of talking. It's a distinctly human *invention* for summoning things that aren't present. Thus, the poem's use of apostrophe plays into its own inherent contradiction: the hawk's nature is beyond human understanding, but only human thought can express this. In this way, apostrophe here acts as a human device for understanding non-human lives. It, and the poem as a whole, functions as a kind of jumping-off point for people to imagine what it's like to be a hawk.

**Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "The convenience of the high trees!"

## CAESURA

Caesura is used quite sparingly in "Hawk Roosting." Two caesurae appear in the first stanza, with two more elsewhere in the poem.

The poem opens with an image of the hawk roosting, as the title suggests. It sits at the "top of the wood," high above its kingdom:

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

This is a moment of stasis, which is not to be mistaken for a sign of weakness. The hawk is in no hurry, acting accordingly to its own whims, desires, and needs. The caesurae work by making this opening slow-paced and unhurried. The hawk is happy to rest in "Inaction," or to dream of its "perfect kills." Each comma gives the poem breathing space and pause.

The next caesura is in line 11. This one works with diacope (the repeated "my") to make the reader consider how each part of the hawk's body is precisely engineered to allow it to kill effectively:

> To produce my foot, my each feather:

The final caesura is in line 13. This is best considered in context with the line that comes before it (which is enjambed across the two stanzas):

> Now I hold Creation in my foot
> Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -

The way these lines connect over the two stanzas, and are modified by the word "Or," suggests the hawk's sense of freedom and its dominance over its environment. The caesura emphasizes this, placed early in the line to disrupt the poem's sense of flow and make it clear that the hawk is in charge. Indeed, coming just after the word "up," the comma seems to give that syllable a kind of upwards sound, granting it its own little piece of airspace.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "wood, my"
- **Line 2:** "Inaction, no"
- **Line 11:** "foot, my"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance is used subtly throughout "Hawk Roosting." One

example of this subtlety is in line 6:

> The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray

Here, the /n/ and /s/ sounds give the line a bouncy feel. This evokes the freedom of the hawk as it soars above the earth, looking down at the ground in search of its prey.

Line 9 also uses consonance to great effect:

> My feet are locked upon the rough bark.

When read aloud, these hard /k/ sounds require the reader to monetarily stop the airflow in their mouth as they speak these words. This creates a kind of "lock" in the mouth, subtly conveying the way that the hawk's feet are gripped steadfastly around the tree's bark.

Line 13 and 14's consonance has a markedly different effect:

> Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
> I kill where I please because it is all mine.

Here, we've bolded the /l/ sounds to draw attention to the slow, almost lazy feel of these lines. This consonance helps evoke the way in which the hawk—as it describes itself—is in no hurry, flying over its domain in order to kill when and where it "please[s]."

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "t," "t," "d," "d"
- **Line 2:** "n," "n," "n," "f," "f"
- **Line 3:** "n," "h," "k," "h," "n," "h," "k"
- **Line 4:** "r," "n," "p," "r," "r," "p," "r"
- **Line 5:** "n," "n," "n," "r," "s"
- **Line 6:** "r," "s," "n," "c," "n," "s," "n," "r"
- **Line 7:** "r"
- **Line 8:** "th," "r," "th," "f," "p," "r," "f," "r," "n," "p," "n"
- **Line 9:** "ck," "k"
- **Line 10:** "t," "t," "k," "C," "r"
- **Line 11:** "r," "m," "f," "m," "f"
- **Line 12:** "n," "n," "f"
- **Line 13:** "l," "v," "l," "v," "ll," "l," "l"
- **Line 14:** "k," "ll," "l," "s," "c," "s," "s," "ll"
- **Line 15:** "r," "n," "r," "n," "m"
- **Line 16:** "M," "m," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 17:** "Th," "t," "t," "th"
- **Line 18:** "th," "th," "t," "t"
- **Line 19:** "Th," "th," "th"
- **Line 20:** "r," "m," "t," "r," "t," "m," "r," "t"
- **Line 21:** "n," "n"
- **Line 22:** "N," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 23:** "M," "m," "n," "n"
- **Line 24:** "ng," "th," "ng," "th"

## DIACOPE

There are a few examples of diacope in "Hawk Roosting."

The first of these is in line 3 (quoted with line 2 for context):

> Inaction, no falsifying dream
> Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

The diacope here emphasizes the particular shape of the hawk's head and feet. Both of these are hooked, a shape that carries with it connotations of violence and death. Hooks are used in fishing and hunting, and also for the storage of dead animals. Accordingly, stressing the hawk's hookedness through diacope portrays the bird as a well-tuned killing machine.

Another example of diacope serves a similar function:

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

The diacope here also has the effect of helping draw the reader's attention to the individual body parts of the hawk, and how each of them seems perfectly designed to aid the bird in acting out its nature.

In these same lines, the repetition of "Creation" might be thought of as diacope as well, although it's more precisely identified as antanaclasis, and is covered in its own entry.

The poem's final use of diacope comes in lines 22 and 23:

> Nothing has changed since I began.
> My eye has permitted no change.

Here, the hawk repeats the word "change," once as a verb and once as a noun, emphasizing how everything is going to stay the same—even the hawk's word choice isn't going to budge.

**Where Diacope appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "hooked," "hooked"
- **Line 10:** "Creation"
- **Line 11:** "foot"
- **Line 12:** "Creation," "foot"
- **Line 22:** "changed"
- **Line 23:** "change"

## END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping is used frequently in "Hawk Roosting." It captures the powerful stillness that accompanies the hawk's killer instincts.

The first end-stop comes at the end of the very first line, immediately halting any early momentum built by the poem:

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

This end-stop takes the pace out of the poem, creating a sense of "Inaction," as the hawk says in line 2. The first stanza portrays the hawk as a creature that, for all its fearsome speed and power (hawks can dive through the air at speeds of around 150 mph), feels itself to be in no hurry at all. It can kill when it wants, and will wait till that moment.

Line 5's end-stop is also significant:

The convenience of the high trees!

This line ends in an exclamation mark and is also an example of apostrophe. The hawk here is expressing the way that its environment seems perfectly attuned to suit its killing instincts. From the "high trees," the hawk can survey its kingdom and swoop down when it wants to. The end-stop makes this expression seem almost ecstatic.

Line 9's end-stop is also important. The hawk rests in another moment of "inaction," its feet gripping the "rough bark." The pause created by the end-stop conveys a sense of being at rest, waiting for something. In fact, the following three stanzas also begin with end-stops, a deliberate effort to evoke the way that the hawk is constantly switching between stillness and sudden movement.

The entirety of the final stanza is end-stopped. This lends the hawk's words—which describe how it is going to "keep things" as they are, because these things are well suited to its way of life—an extra air of authority and drama.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "closed."
- **Line 3:** "feet:"
- **Line 4:** "eat."
- **Line 5:** "trees!"
- **Line 7:** "me;"
- **Line 8:** "inspection."
- **Line 9:** "bark."
- **Line 11:** "feather:"
- **Line 13:** "slowly -"
- **Line 14:** "mine."
- **Line 15:** "body:"
- **Line 16:** "heads -"
- **Line 17:** "death."
- **Line 19:** "living."
- **Line 20:** "right:"
- **Line 21:** "me."
- **Line 22:** "began."
- **Line 23:** "change."
- **Line 24:** "this."

## ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used quite sparingly in "Hawk Roosting"; most of the lines are end-stopped.

An early example of enjambment occurs between lines 6 and 7:

The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;

These lines conjure an image of the hawk soaring freely above the earth, scouting below for prey. The enjambment creates the impression of air between the lines, a moment of white space that conveys a sense of the hawk's airborne freedom.

Between lines 10 and 11, the enjambment works to extend the length of the phrase:

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:

Having a longer phrase hints at the long process of "Creation" that has resulted in the figure of the hawk (this can also be interpreted as a reference to evolution). The phrase takes longer to complete, mirroring the vast amount of time which it has taken for the hawk to become such a well-tuned killing machine.

The enjambment between lines 18 and 19 is also significant:

For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.

The lack of an end-stop after "direct" makes the phrase—and its sense of momentum—seem more direct. This evokes the ruthless power of the hawk when it swoops down to kill.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "dream"
- **Line 3:** "Between"
- **Line 6:** "ray"
- **Line 7:** "Are"
- **Line 10:** "Creation"
- **Line 11:** "To"
- **Line 12:** "foot"
- **Line 13:** "Or"
- **Line 18:** "direct"
- **Line 19:** "Through"

## PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used from start to finish in "Hawk Roosting"—there isn't a single line without it, in fact! That's because the poem is told from the hawk's perspective, making the bird of prey into the "I" of the poem. It's an interesting approach, and one that has been criticized by some.

First, it's important to understand the reasons behind this use of personification. Hughes said of the poem himself, "Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple because maybe Nature is no longer so simple." In other words, the poem attempts to speak in the voice of the wilderness itself, as best as it can, using the complexities of human language.

Humans understand the world, in part, through language and the imagination. The poem attempts to understand the instinctive attitudes and behaviors of the hawk by inhabiting its mind. This allows the poem to draw a distinction between the hawk's character and that of humanity. The hawk is not wedded to the same sense of morality—particularly Christian morality—that informs the lives of many humans. For the hawk, killing is natural, and this is expressed in the relatively arrogant and superior thoughts that the poem grants to it: "I kill where I please because it is all mine."

But as critics have noted, this means that the poem contains an inherent logical contradiction. Hughes wants to explore the interior monologue of the hawk, but how the hawk actually thinks and feels is impossible to know.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-24

### ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly in "Hawk Roosting." It is most prominent in lines 2-4 of the first stanza:

> ... dream
> Between ... hooked feet:
> Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

There are two different assonant sounds at play here. The long /ee/ sound is prominent, and approximates the hawk's own screeching call. This fills the lines with an almost subconscious sense of the hawk's threat of violence. The /e/ of "rehearse" and the /e/ of "perfect" also sound the same, which represents the idea of perfection that the hawk is thinking about in its sleep.

The other main example is in line 9:

> My feet are locked upon the rough bark.

This line is primarily concerned with aurally representing the tight grip that the hawk's claws have on the branch. These two /o/ sounds work with the harsh consonance in "locked" and "bark" to create a rough and rugged sound, which grips the line in the same way that hawk tightens its feet on the bark.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "y," "eye"
- **Line 2:** "ea"
- **Line 3:** "ee," "ee"
- **Line 4:** "ee," "e," "ea," "e," "ea"
- **Line 9:** "o," "o"
- **Line 20:** "y," "i"
- **Line 23:** "y," "eye"

## VOCABULARY

**The Wood** (Line 1) - A *wood* is a substantial gathering of trees. It is pretty much the same as a forest, though forests are usually considered larger than woods.

**Falsifying** (Line 2) - If something is *falsified*, it is altered in a misleading way. The hawk is hinting that humans indulge in "falsifying" thoughts—like the idea that violence is evil. It distances itself from such ideas.

**Buoyancy** (Line 6) - *Buoyancy* relates to the power to float. Like a leaf floating on the surface of water, the hawk is buoyant on the air.

**Creation** (Line 10, Line 12) - The capitalization of this word suggests that it relates to religious myths about the way the world was made, such as the Genesis story in the Bible. But it also carries with it suggestions of evolution too.

**Sophistry** (Line 15) - *Sophistry* relates to clever but false logic or argumentation. As with the mention of "falsifying" in line 2, the hawk is implicitly criticizing that way human believe that violence is inherently evil.

**Manners** (Line 16) - *Manners* can mean a general set of behaviors, but also has a more specific meaning that relates to social conventions and politeness. The point the hawk is making is that it doesn't need any of these.

**Allotment** (Line 17) - To *allot* something is to deal it out—the hawk "allots" death to its prey whenever it (the hawk) feels like it. An allotment is also a small plot of land that people use to grow fruits and vegetables, perhaps hinting at the hawk's sense of ownership over the land below.

**Assert** (Line 20) - To *assert* something is to insist, particularly in relation to an argument. A politician, for instance, might assert that their policies are better for the country than someone else's. In contrast to this, the hawk's right to kill doesn't rely on any argumentation; it's simply how nature is.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Hawk Roosting" is made up of six quatrains. That said, this is the only real formal constraint placed on the poem—there is no

rhyme scheme or strict meter. However, the quatrains, combined with the poem's extensive use of end-stopped lines, do give the poem a sense of order and patterning. This plays into the discussion of "Creation" in the third stanza. Just as nature has created the hawk's perfect "foot, my each feather," so too has the poem achieved its own deliberate structure.

In terms of how the poem unfolds, the poem starts by setting the scene, with the hawk biding its time at the "top of the wood." Stanza 2 looks at the way nature seems perfectly calibrated to aid the hawk's killer instinct. The third stanza discusses the way that the hawk's body itself is perfectly suited to that same aim, whereas the following stanza differentiates the hawk from the "sophistry" of mankind. In the final two stanzas, the hawk talks in almost philosophical terms, staking its claim at the top of its ecosystem.

## METER

"Hawk Roosting" does not follow a regular metrical scheme, but is rather written in free verse. That doesn't mean that the poem isn't attentive to the use of stresses, but that there is no overall governing meter. In fact, since meter might suggest human artifice, the poem instead employs tightly controlled but erratic stresses, which mimic the hawk's instinctual, highly calibrated movements.

Line 3, for example, uses stress effectively to create a sense of the sharpness of the hawk's head and beak:

> Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

The way that these stresses are clustered together gives them a subtly violent sound, suggesting the killing power of the hawk.

Similarly, line 9 uses stresses to convey the tight grip that the hawk holds onto its branch with (also subtly suggesting the tight grip that it can hold its prey with):

> My feet are locked upon the rough bark.

The two stresses at the end of the line here give the line a sense of firmness, hinting at the hawk's power.

## RHYME SCHEME

"Hawk Roosting" doesn't have a rhyme scheme. A poem with neat rhymes might have counteracted the poem's picture of the hawk's capacity for violence and killing—it would have seemed too clean, too human. This approach has a roughness and unpredictability that matches the hawk's way of being.

The only perfect rhyme in the poem occurs in the first stanza. Indeed, the reader could be forgiven for then expecting a scheme based on this rhyme to follow in the later stanzas. Lines 3 and 4 rhyme "feet" with "eat":

> Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
> Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

This rhyme occurs in the hawk's dream, as if rules of the poem have been suspended for the moment. Here, the perfect rhyme coincides with the hawk's own dreams of perfection. The sound of the rhyme embodies the "perfect kills."

Because of this early moment of rhyme, an attentive reader might scan the rest of the poem to see if there are other rhymes. In fact, the poem includes some moments of slant rhyme that could almost be glossed over. There's "trees" and "me" in the second stanza, "slowly" and "body" in the fourth stanza, "death" and "direct" in the fifth stanza, and "began" and "change" in the sixth stanza. These instances seem to flirt with the idea of rhyme, without fully getting there. Just as the poem lies somewhere in the division between humans and non-humans, its use of rhyme also lies between rhyme and no rhyme.

# SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is none other than the hawk itself. The hawk is personified throughout, giving the poet (and the reader) the chance to imagine the interior thoughts of this fearsome bird of prey. In particular, this technique is useful because it allows the poem to explore differences between the hawk's attitudes and behaviors and those of humankind.

Throughout, the hawk has an air of arrogance and superiority. It conceives of itself as perfect, and sees nature as a world perfectly tuned to suit its killing ways. It is, in many ways, the authority of its environment. In the second stanza, it says,

> The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
> Are of advantage to me;
> And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

This section conveys the way in which the hawk feels a kind of ownership over everything that it sees below.

The use of personification also allows the poem to implicitly critique the way that humans think about the world. The hawk has "no falsifying dream,"and indulges in no "sophistry" (clever but false logic) or "manners" (unnecessary niceties). In other words, the hawk as a speaker is very different from a human speaker. Although its main task in life is killing, it's not depicted as evil. Rather, it exists as a part of nature that is outside human morality.

# SETTING

The poem is set within the hawk's natural habitat: "the wood" (which is pretty much the same as a forest). The poem opens with the hawk sitting at the top of a tree, its eyes closed in a

state of rest. Stanza two expands on the setting, with the hawk noting the way that the "high trees" and "the air's buoyancy and the sun's ray" all seem perfectly suited to its way of being. In other words, the natural setting is perfectly attuned to the hawk.

But there's another dimension to the setting, too. The poem is very much an interior monologue, set within the mind—or the imagined mind—of the hawk. So in terms of setting the poem is as much about the hawk's psychology as it is about the actual landscape. This comes across in abstract lines like "There is no sophistry in my body," as well as more figurative lines, like "For the one path of my flight is direct / Through the bones of the living."

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is considered one of the foremost writers of the 20th century. His arrival on the scene with his 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of British poetry; Hughes's raw imagery challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like Philip Larkin. To this day, Hughes remains one of the most widely read poets in the English language.

"Hawk Roosting" first appeared in *Lupercal*, Ted Hughes's second collection of poetry, in 1960. Like much of Hughes's work, this book is both reverent and unsentimental about the natural world, seeing it not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as the 19th-century Romantics like William Wordsworth often did) but also as a place full of instinctive violence and danger. Animals also appear throughout Hughes's poetry (most famously in the "Crow" series of poems), where they often symbolically reflect the human psyche.

Hughes was deeply influenced by the work of his wife, fellow poet Sylvia Plath. Over the course of their (often tormented) marriage, the pair produced a rich, unsettling body of work. It was Plath who typed up Hughes's first manuscript for *The Hawk in the Rain*, and who convinced him to submit it to a first-book contest judged by Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, and Stephen Spender. The manuscript won first prize, and its publication in 1957 propelled Hughes to international recognition.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hughes was born in Mytholmroyd in Yorkshire, England, in 1930. The poems of *Lupercal* (like much of his work) are influenced by the rural landscape of his upbringing. Hughes's father served in World War I, and the shadow of both world wars also informed Hughes's observations of the natural world.

Over the course of his long and prolific career (which ran from the 1950s until his death in 1998), Hughes also saw wild social change. He began publishing his poetry during a period of rapid post-war urbanization and industrialization. Britain had a booming manufacturing industry in products as diverse as ships, cars, metals, and textiles, but with this boom came increasing pollution. Hughes's poetry, with its interest in wild nature and animal instinct, might be read as a skeptical rejoinder to a post-war enthusiasm for civilizing, scientific progress.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading by Hughes — Hughes reads the poem in his powerful Yorkshire accent. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL3vCYSR-Y0)
- Plath and Hughes Interviewed — A fascinating discussion with Ted Hughes and the American poet (and Hughes's wife) Sylvia Plath. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqhsnk6vY8E)
- More Poems and Biography — Resources from the Poetry Foundation on Hughes and his work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)
- Ted Hughes at the British Library — More resources and a biography of Ted Hughes, from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ted-hughes)
- A Documentary about Hughes — A BBC show about Hughes' life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- A Picture of Otto
- Bayonet Charge
- Cat and Mouse
- Snowdrop
- Telegraph Wires
- The Jaguar
- The Thought Fox
- Wind

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Howard, James. "*Hawk Roosting*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 28 Feb 2022.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Hawk Roosting*." LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved February 28, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/ted-hughes/hawk-roosting.