



Perched on Deceit: The Hawk as a Symbol of Political Abuse in Hughes' Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting* from a perspective which interprets the hawk as a symbol for rotten political authority. The poem has been read as an expression of natural supremacy but here it is re-read to uncover similarities with the mentality and behavior of an autocratic political leader. The absolute sense of entitlement of the hawk and its insulation from the trials of the world beneath are discussed as metaphors of a ruler's self-serving advancement for power at the expense of ethical considerations and the welfare of the citizenry. Ultimately, the analysis illustrates how *Hawk Roosting* is an effective allegory for political despotism that sheds light on the ruinous power dynamics which are still salient in current political rhetoric.

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1 Introduction

Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting* is celebrated for its vivid portrayal of raw, unbridled power. While many readers interpret the poem as a depiction of natural dominance, this paper reimagines the hawk as a potent metaphor for a corrupt political figure. In this alternative reading, the hawk embodies the ruthless self-assurance, unyielding entitlement, and brutal exercise of power characteristic of a despotic leader.

"The wood" in line-1 refers to a forest, as in the American expression "the woods." Seated in a tree top, the hawk is able to look down on the world like a king." (Khan, n.d.) The opening line, "**I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed,**" (Hughes, 2011) immediately establishes an image of elevation and isolation. "The very first word of the poem "I" is a sign of the Supreme Ego." (Jayatunge, n.d.) The hawk's declaration of sitting at the highest point of the wood mirrors a political leader's lofty position in



the hierarchy, one that physically and metaphorically distances him from the everyday struggles of the people below. However, it is to be noted that the Hawk's manner of sitting at the top of the wood, as depicted in both the poems focuses on the concept of panopticism as the Hawk is able to inspect upon all the living creatures of the world and act accordingly. (Das, n.d.)

"These lines indicate that the hawk is a very intelligent bird. This use of language implies that the hawk is mentally as well as physically superior. It also expresses human's savagery, egoism and superiority to others." (Jayatunge, n.d.) The very fact of sitting alone at the top displays how the hawk is far from the reach of the common people. The word "I" here does not depict the hawk or the political person itself but the very authority or the supremacy of the politician that is given to him. The phrase "my eyes closed" suggests a deliberate, willful blindness, a refusal to acknowledge the needs or suffering of those he governs. This self-imposed detachment is characteristic of corrupt politicians, who often insulate themselves from reality in order to preserve their power and self-interest.

"Metonymically, the figure of the Hawk in the poem stands for birds of prey, and allegorically, it refers to political dictators in human history." (Ghazzoul, 2021)

As Ghazzoul observes, the hawk's portrayal serves as an allegory for political dictators, highlighting the poem's deeper commentary on authoritarian power structures. Following this, the line **"Inaction, no falsifying dream"** (Hughes, 2011) reinforces the leader's rejection of pretense. The absence of a "falsifying dream" implies that the leader operates solely on pragmatic, and often brutal, imperatives. This stark approach to power underscores the leader's cynical nature: he neither promises hope nor indulges in the fantasies of change, instead focusing entirely on maintaining his dominance at any cost. The leader is not interested in providing a "falsifying dream" to the people where the dream may resonate with good education, hygienic conditions and better living environment hence the corrupt controller takes no action and lives in "inaction".

The stanza continues with **"Between my hooked head and hooked feet:"** (Hughes, 2011) where the imagery becomes palpably predatory. The repeated reference to "hooked" evokes the natural weapons of a hawk, suggesting that every part of the leader's being is adapted for ruthless control. Much like a hawk's talons, which are perfectly designed for capturing prey, the corrupt political leader's mechanisms of power are engineered for subjugation and suppression. This visual metaphor encapsulates the inherent brutality and calculated precision with which the leader exercises his authority, reinforcing the idea that his governance is as much about destruction as it is about dominance.



“In ‘Hawk Roosting,’ Ted Hughes portrays the thought process that goes in the mind of the Hawk and relates it with the tyranny of human despotism.” (Shekhawat, 2012)

Shekhawat emphasizes that Hughes uses the hawk's internal monologue to mirror the mindset of a tyrannical leader, drawing parallels between natural predation and human despotism. In moments of repose, the leader is depicted as mentally rehearsing acts of violence—“perfect kills”—which underscores a relentless, almost obsessive commitment to the maintenance of power. This continuous engagement with ruthless strategies suggests that the leader's brutality is not circumstantial but rather an intrinsic aspect of his identity. The notion of “perfect kills” implies a cold, calculated precision, mirroring the systematic and unremorseful nature of political repression carried out by corrupt authorities.

Here, the hawk extols the benefits derived from his elevated environment, drawing a parallel to how a corrupt leader capitalizes on his privileged position. The “high trees” are not merely a backdrop but a symbol of the elite structures and institutions that safeguard and reinforce his authority. This elevated perch distances him from the everyday hardships of the populace.

The lines regarding “the air's buoyancy and the sun's ray” suggest that natural elements, typically accessible to all, are here manipulated to bolster the hawk's—and by extension, the leader's—status. Just as a despotic politician may harness favorable policies or media spin to augment his image, the hawk uses the very forces of nature to elevate his presence and justify his rule. Finally, the assertion that “the earth's face upward for my inspection” encapsulates a complete domination over the realm below. The earth, representing the people, is positioned as subservient, existing solely to be observed, controlled, and exploited by the leader. Moreover, people generally observe politicians but they can barely do anything against them, giving the ultimate freedom to the corrupted powerful tyranny.

“Perfect kills”—demonstrates the inherent brutality that often accompanies corrupt governance, the hawk serves as a timeless emblem of political domination, reminding us that when power is unchecked and self-serving, it can transform nature itself into an arena for ruthless control and exploitation.

Now I hold Creation in my foot, a ruler's self-aggrandizing power, suggesting that every aspect of the hawk's being has been divinely orchestrated to serve his will, much like a tyrant who legitimizes his reign by claiming an ordained right to govern.



“Hughes’s hawk ... sounds like Hitler’s familiar spirit,” its “centrality reflecting a misguided, inflated ego.” (Mandal, 2024) Mandal draws a parallel between the hawk's self-aggrandizing perspective and the inflated ego characteristic of totalitarian figures like Hitler, reinforcing the poem's critique of absolute power. This imagery mirrors a leader's steadfast grip on established institutions and traditional structures, positioning himself as immovable and unchallengeable. The rough bark represents the hardened, often unyielding base of society—its traditions, laws, and systems—that the corrupt leader secures to maintain his authority. His locked feet are not merely a physical anchor but a symbol of how deeply his power is rooted in the bedrock of the political order.

The next lines elevate the hawk's physical form to an almost mythic status. In a political metaphor, this can be seen as the leader's inflated perception of his own indispensability. It implies that his capabilities and his very existence are the culmination of a grand, cosmic design. Just as the hawk's form is portrayed as the perfect product of creation, the corrupt leader sees himself as the inevitable, even divinely ordained, custodian of power—a being whose authority is not subject to mortal critique or opposition.

The leader's power, like the hawk's grasp, is portrayed as absolute and self-affirming, leaving no room for dissent or deviation. It reveals a portrait of a despotic leader whose unrestrained power is exercised without pretense or moral consideration.

“Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –” immediately conjures the image of a leader who ascends above the fray to survey and manipulate his realm. The act of flying upward symbolizes an elevated position—both physically and metaphorically—that allows the hawk to oversee every facet of his territory. This is akin to a ruler who occupies the highest seat of power, from which every decision is meticulously controlled. The phrase “revolve it all slowly” implies that this leader orchestrates the mechanisms of governance with deliberate, measured precision. There is an unsettling calmness in his methodical manipulation of events, suggesting that the political machine runs solely on his command and that every part of society is expected to move in accordance with his predetermined rhythm.

Absolute Entitlement and Brutal Authority

In the subsequent line, *“I kill where I please because it is all mine,”* the hawk asserts his absolute right to determine life and death. This is not merely a statement of power but a declaration of complete ownership over his domain. The imagery of killing “where I please” strips away any semblance of



accountability; the leader's whims dictate the fate of those under his control. It explains how humans take their dominance for granted and how humans abuse their powers. Nazi Germany is the best example to show human's savagery. (Khan, n.d.) This reflects the grim reality of tyrannical regimes, where opposition is eradicated without due process, and where the leader's personal interests and survival take precedence over justice or morality. The absence of sophistry underscores a dangerous transparency: his methods are simple, effective, and ruthlessly straightforward. The image of tearing off heads is both literal and symbolic: it represents the swift, decisive elimination of opposition and dissent. No one can stand against the leader and can do so only if they are ready to die. The essence of tyrannical authority—a leader who uses fear, violence, and sheer physical dominance as his tools of governance, leaving no room for mercy or compromise. The leader's right to govern, to dispense death, is presented as an inherent truth, one that exists beyond the realm of rational debate or moral scrutiny. In this allegorical reading, it reflects the ideology of a tyrant who considers any form of opposition not only futile but illegitimate. There is an unwavering confidence in the natural order of their rule—a belief that their dominion, even when it results in death and destruction, is self-evident and incontestable.

Synthesis and Political Allegory

When reinterpreted as a depiction of corrupt political power, this passage from *Hawk Roosting* becomes a stark critique of authoritarianism. The systematic "allotment of death" symbolizes a leader's cold, bureaucratic determination to control society through fear and violence. The direct, unyielding path of the hawk's flight parallels the iron-fisted execution of power by a dictator who uses lethal force to quash dissent. By declaring that "no arguments assert my right," the hawk embodies the self-justifying nature of corrupt rule—its authority is imposed without negotiation, rooted in an ideology that precludes any challenge to its legitimacy.

"The sun is behind me," evokes the imagery of celestial endorsement. Much like a political leader who fashions his regime as divinely sanctioned, the hawk is portrayed as moving under the auspices of natural, unchallengeable power. This alignment with the sun—a universal symbol of legitimacy and authority—implies that his dominance is not only self-derived but also backed by the forces of nature. "Nothing has changed since I began" reflects a stubborn resistance to evolution or reform. In the realm of politics, this can be interpreted as the tyrant's refusal to adapt or acknowledge the needs and voices of the governed. It is an assertion of stagnation, where the status quo is maintained at all costs.



Conclusion

Together, these stanzas construct a layered allegory for political tyranny. Hughes' work, when interpreted through this political lens, serves as a timeless warning: unchecked authority, however divinely endorsed it may seem, inevitably leads to a repressive system where life is measured in terms of control and dominance. The hawk, in its predatory majesty, embodies the dangers of power unrestrained—a force that, by denying change and asserting absolute control, transforms society into a realm where dissent is silenced and death is systematically dispensed. In this dual analysis, *Hawk Roosting* not only celebrates natural might but also critiques the corrosive impact of political corruption, urging readers to recognize the peril inherent in a system that prioritizes permanence and unchallenged authority above all else.

In conclusion, Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting* offers a timeless meditation on the nature of power by drawing parallels between the ruthless behavior of the hawk and the despotic rule of historical tyrants. The political climate of Hughes' era, with its pervasive fear of authoritarianism and the realities of post-colonial transitions, informs this powerful allegory. By comparing the hawk's unchallenged dominion and the chilling consequences of its actions to those of infamous political leaders, Hughes not only critiques the allure of absolute power but also warns of its inevitable, destructive repercussions. This analysis enriches our understanding of the poem, reminding us that unchecked authority, no matter how divinely endorsed it might appear, carries with it the seeds of its own undoing.

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