

The Wounded Rivers: Pollution and Deep Ecology in Ted Hughes' *River*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the ecological themes in Ted Hughes' poetic anthology, River, analysing the portrayal of rivers as both symbols of life and environmental degradation. By focusing on pollution, the paper examines Hughes' critique of human impact on water bodies, particularly rivers, through poignant lines of his poetry. Drawing on the philosophy of Deep Ecology, the study investigates the interconnectedness of man and nature, urging a shift from anthropocentrism to a more holistic and ecological perspective. This work highlights Hughes call for ecological responsibility, with his poems offering a timely reflection on the environmental challenges of both his time and today.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Deep Ecology, Pollution, Rivers, Ted Hughes.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Rivers have always been regarded as crucial to the existence and prosperity of life. They are not just bodies of water but carriers of life, reflecting the interconnectedness of nature. Rivers have inspired cultural, spiritual and poetic interpretations expressing the significance of time, regeneration and transformation. Unfortunately, these waterways have come to environmental decline and are troubled by pollution and neglect. In Ted Hughes' *River*, the damage and destruction caused by human activity is blatantly proved, with the poet revealing the profound ecological damage inflicted upon these waterways. Hughes portrays rivers not only as polluted, but as ecosystems on the threshold of collapse, their vitality drained by industrial waste and chemical overspill. By focusing on these concrete environmental issues, Hughes moves beyond abstract ecological concerns to confront the pressing reality of ecological destruction.

Over the last few decades, critical interest in the ecological dimensions of Hughes' poetry has grown considerably. Among the earliest and most influential studies is Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts' *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, which focused on Hughes' constant engagement with the natural world. Gifford and Roberts argued that Hughes departed from the idyllic and romantic representations of nature usually found in traditional Romantic and pastoral poetry. Instead, he presents nature as a realm of elemental energy, vitality, struggle and violence (Gifford and Roberts 14-18). Their study established Hughes as a poet whose work confronts the realities of the natural world rather than offering idealised versions of natural harmony.

Gifford later developed these ideas through his concept of 'post-pastoral.' In *Pastoral* (1999), he argues that contemporary environmental writing must move beyond romantic idealisation of nature and purely anti-pastoral critiques towards an ecological understanding of the interconnectedness of human and non-human life (Gifford 146-74). Post-pastoral literature

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recognised the dynamic interaction between nature and culture. Such a perspective is relevant to the anthology *River*, where river and aquatic life are presented as possessing integrity and significance beyond human needs and desires.

Johnathan Bate's theory of ecopoetics provides another useful framework for understanding Hughes' environmental vision. In the *Song of Earth* (2000) as a form of dwelling that reconnects human beings with the earth through poetic language (Bate 75-107). Bate draws upon Martin Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling to argue that poetry enables readers to experience the rhythms and processes of the natural world rather than merely representing them. Bate's insights illuminate Hughes' poetic practice in *River*, where detailed observation of the rivers and aquatic life foster ecological awareness and challenges the handling of nature as a resource for human exploitation.

Therefore, existing scholarship has established Ted Hughes as a major ecological poet whose work critiques anthropocentrism and highlights the importance of the non-human world. So, while critics have explored Hughes' environmental leanings through the concepts of anti-pastoral, post-pastoral and ecopoetics, comparatively little attention has been paid to *River* through the specific framework of Deep Ecology. This paper attempts to address that gap by examining how Hughes' representation of polluted and threatened rivers affirms the intrinsic value of non-human life and advocates the idea of biocentrism.

This paper explores how *River*, a poetry collection by Hughes published in 1983, aligns with the principles of deep ecology, criticising Man's exploitative relationship with nature and advocating for a deeper and more respectful understanding of the natural world. When read deep ecologically, Hughes' work highlights the urgent need for action to address pollution and calls for a fundamental shift in how we relate to the environment, recognizing the inherent value of all ecosystems, regardless of their usefulness to humans. This paper will emphasize the urgency of environmental conservation positioning rivers as more than waterways.

The modernist worldview, rooted in industrialisation and technological progress, regards nature as a commodity to be used for human benefit. The environmental crisis we face today — pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss — is due to this consumption-driven attitude. Indigenous societies who lived sustainably in balance and harmony with the Earth followed beliefs and practices which instilled the truth that humans are in no way separate from the Earth. They viewed Nature as a sacred and living entity. Their customs and traditions were ecologically balanced, emphasising sustainability and coexistence. Hilary Prentice is true when she states "... a collective denial about our current unsustainable and destructive consumption of the earth co-exists with a mindset that constantly reinforces our separation from, and superiority over, the rest of life on this earth" (176). This anthropocentric attitude of separation and superiority reduces nature to commodities, overlooking their intrinsic value.

Deep Ecological Reading of *River*

The first poem to be analysed in this study is "If" (32). This poem is mainly about human carelessness and his neglect of bearing the responsibility for the planet's health. The poem bears testimony to man's disregard for nature, with a special focus on water pollution. By presenting humanity as the reason for ecological contamination, Hughes challenges anthropocentric assumptions and anticipates a central principle of deep ecology, namely the interconnectedness of life forms. As Arne Naess posits, deep ecology is a "non-anthropocentric philosophy that rejects the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image" (Naess, *Shallow* 95). The poem is replete with poignant lines like "If you have infected the sky and the earth/ Caught its disease off you-you are the virus" (5-6). The focus on the pollution of water suggests that Hughes was greatly influenced by the growing environmental concerns of

the late twentieth century. The metaphor of humanity as a “virus” is significant as it reverses the traditional view of human superiority and portrays human beings as agents of ecological disruption

The poem’s depiction of air pollution also hints at the issue of acid rain, describing how “the sky is infected” (1) by industrial emissions that run down on the earth and rivers to contaminate the water used by people, animals and plants. This critique aligns with the platform point articulated by Næss that the “human impact on other forms of life is currently too large” and requires “major changes, especially economic, technological and ideological ones” (Næss, *Ecology* 29). “If” hints at the more baleful forms of pollution and is an attack on the unimagined consequences of human technologies and embellishments. The lines anticipate a future in which environmental degradation compromises access to uncontaminated water: “Where will you get a pure drink now? / Already- the drop has returned to the cup/ Already you are your ditch, and there you drink” (14-16). Thus, the poem presents pollution as a self-inflicted ecological crisis, emphasising the interdependence of humanity and the natural world.

The poem “Dee” (20), found in *River*, which stands for the River Dee in the United Kingdom, can mean any river in general. Even when the whole of nature is locked up in snow, the river moves on with inexhaustible energy. The imagery of “springs locked up” and the “plumpness” (1-2) of the river reveals nature’s interdependence. The river relies on the hills for its sustenance, symbolising the web of life. The choice of the River Dee is significant because, like many British rivers, it has been subjected to increasing agricultural and industrial pressures. The river has long been used for irrigation and industrial purposes, making it vulnerable to environmental degradation (Harrison 19). Read in this context, Hughes’s portrayal of the river acquires a broader ecological significance, drawing attention to the pressures placed upon river ecosystems by human activity.

When in winter the whole of nature is iced up into indolence and hibernation, the river appears to be a fine jewel on the bosom of the earth, flowing with grandeur and majesty:

Nothing else dare or can
Pilfer from the shrunk, steely procession.
Nevertheless, the lit queenliness of snow hills,
The high, frozen bosom, wears this river
Like a peculiarly fine jewel. (18-22)

The use of “pilfer” suggests human attempts to appropriate and exploit the river’s resources for material gain. The shrunk and steely procession describes a diminished river struggling due to exploitation and pollution that drains off the river’s vitality. Despite the challenges it faces, Dee is portrayed as “the lit queenliness of snow hills” and a fine jewel, elevating it to a position of reverence, urging readers to appreciate its beauty and magnificence beyond anthropocentric concerns.

The poem ultimately presents the river as more than a natural resource. Through images of endurance, beauty, and interconnectedness, Hughes challenges utilitarian attitudes towards nature and encourages a biocentric understanding of the natural world. “Dee” exemplifies the post-pastoral vision identified by Gifford, where human beings are invited to recognise their place within a larger ecological community and experience a collapse of the human/nature divide (26)

“Ophelia” (17) is another poem that can be analysed deep ecologically, emphasizing interconnectedness, ecological disruption and the inherent value of nature. It depicts the river as a sustainer of life, a place of creation as well as destruction. Its valuable presence as a key connection in nature is emphasized. The pool’s “kneading tumble and the water- hammer” (4) portrays the river as an autonomous and dynamic system, suggesting that nature’s intricate

processes are constantly in motion. The complex workings and mechanisms going on in the river ecosystems are summed up as: “Into this peculiar engine/ That made it and keeps it going/ And that works it to death” (7-9). The river maintains a healthy balance in its flow if unchecked and untampered by man. The “undercloud” (1) unfurling from the pool evokes a polluted or disturbed environment, alluding to the chemical runoff or contamination clouding the water. Ophelia, often associated with purity, is a dark fish suggesting contamination and loss of purity. The dark colour reflects the impact of industrial activity, where rivers like Ophelia’s domain are burdened by pollution.

The depiction of the river as a dynamic and impartial force of nature subtly hints at the destructive influence of human activity. The name ‘Ophelia’ originates from literature, most famously as the tragic character in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Ophelia, associated with water and drowning, becomes a symbol of innocence, fragility and the connection between human and the natural world here.

Humankind is considered to be a branch of nature rather than its leader, and much of its prosperity and satisfaction is derived from the partnership with and dependence on nature. Hughes urges his readers to be a steward to earth, rather than aristocratic managers of nature. Jeremy Rifkin has called for a radical view of stewardship based on interdependence and decentralisation. “Maintenance replaces the notion of progress, stewardship replaces ownership, and nurturing replaces engineering. Biological limits to both production and consumption are acknowledged” (*Entropy: A New World View*, 239).

In “Ophelia”, Hughes presents the river as a force that can both create and destroy life. Rather than treating the river as a mere backdrop, he portrays it as a living, active part of the natural world. By emphasizing the river’s power and independence, Hughes blurs the boundary between humans and nature, showing that both are closely connected. This idea reflects a key principle of Deep Ecology, which argues that humans are not separate from nature but are part of a larger ecological system. The poem also supports a biocentric view by suggesting that rivers and other natural elements have value in themselves, not simply because they are useful to people. Through this portrayal, Hughes challenges human-centred attitudes and encourages readers to recognise the interdependence of all living beings in the natural world.

The next poem, “The River” (36) which bears the title of the anthology can be read as a poem disseminating a need for biospherical egalitarianism. The verse begins with “Fallen from heaven, lies across/ The lap of his mother, broken by the world” (1-2). River is attributed heavenly qualities as it emanates from heaven but is broken or wrecked by the people in the world. The poem can be seen as a hint towards the pollution of rivers due to man’s ravenous activities. “Pollution is an ecological problem because it represents a normative claim that too much of something is present in the environment, usually in the wrong place” (Garrard 6). The pollution suggested in the poem recalls contemporary environmental problems such as industrial waste, sewage discharge, and the degradation of aquatic ecosystems.

However, the next line “But water will go on/ Issuing from heaven...through its broken mouth” (3-6) represents its resilience and the continuity of the water cycle. The phrase “broken mouth” evokes an obstructed water mouth due to contamination or damming. Since the river is not of earthly origin, the water is immortal and is “scattered in a million pieces” (7). The eternal properties of water also remind us of scientific recycling: the river water evaporating, then turning into clouds, then into rain and then as river. It has self-cleansing properties and can “wash itself of all deaths” (18). The river’s self-purification reflects its natural ability to sustain life. Nevertheless, Hughes seems to warn that human-caused degradation can affect even this inherent capacity.

The most striking image is found in the line “hung by the heels down the door of a dam” (16), which critiques human exploitation, particularly damming that disrupts the natural flow and causes ecological harm. Damming harms nature by blocking rivers, stopping fish from moving freely and thus destroying the habitat of aquatic life. It traps sediments, affecting downstream ecosystems, and risking the water quality (“People and Environment”). This poem vividly presents the dual nature of rivers: their immense resilience as well as vulnerability to human interference. By portraying rivers as divine and eternal, Hughes calls for a shift from exploitation to reverence, celebrating the power of waterbodies, together with reminding us of our responsibility to protect and conserve our natural world.

“Eighty and Still Fishing for Salmon” (69) which begins with “Still he holds the loom of many rivers/ An old rowan now, arthritic, mossed...roots for grave (1-4), is about the fishing experience of an octogenarian persona. He is arthritic, weak and waiting for death. The angler’s moss-covered, grave-rooted state reflects his ageing as well as the degradation of rivers through negligence and contamination. He watches the “Blackwater” (5) through his hotel glass symbolizing the modern and distanced view of nature where humans are mere observers and not participants. Though Blackwater refers to a river in England, the term carries unusual significance since it can also mean liquid waste turned black due to coal solvents or wastewater containing faeces, urine and flush water expelled from residential areas. As a result, the fishing nets are empty and “the river fishless” (7). He remembers the “Great Days” (8) and his trophies pointing out to the memories of a once-thriving ecosystem.

Though he is physically unable to fish, his mind cannot be let off from the fishing spree. He is smitten by the contentment and relaxation fishing used to endow him: “Soon he will be out there, walking the sliding scree” (15). The angler’s futile act of fishing in a lifeless river becomes a haunting ritual. The “vacant swirl” (17) conveys the absence of fish and the river’s inability to sustain life, hinting at environmental degradation.

Hughes, rather than presenting pollution through direct protest, explores its consequences through the character of the ageing angler, a figure that rejects the traditional “man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image” (Naess 95). The contrast between the remembered abundance of the past and the fishless river of the present transforms the poem into a meditation on ecological loss and memory. The character’s longing to return to the river reflects a process of identification with the natural world, whereby the boundaries of the self are extended beyond the human sphere. This process, also known as extension of one’s ecological self (Becker 23-42), builds on reflection, imagination and intuition in order to enter into another situation and experience. Hughes thus presents the river not merely as a setting for recreation but as an essential part of the speaker’s identity, emphasising humanity’s profound connection with nature.

The issue of pollution is most seriously addressed in the poem “1984 on ‘The Tarka Trail’” (13-16). The first part of the poem describes the tourist trail of the river and Hughes begins his poem: “The river is suddenly green-dense bottle green / Hard in the sun, dark as spinach” (1-2). The river is visibly polluted, having reached the peak of contamination, leaving the water a green tinge due to algae growth. “The river’s floor is a fleece – Tresses of some vile stuff” (4-5), which leaves one’s “fingers foul with a stink of diesel” (6). The pollutants have altered the water quality and increased its turbidity. The river is abundant with algae, which grow only in the presence of harmful waste, having “surfactants, ammonia, phosphates -the whole banquet” (10), turning it into a sewer, beyond recovery.

The extent of water contamination is revealed when Hughes says that “a bottleful is like sap, a rich urine” (14), having bacteria lethal to life forms in general. This problem spreads into

the sea, fouling a larger area. The whole river appears like a “carcase” resembling “a puddled horror” (20). Our focus then shifts to a “stranded mussel” (22) its rotten innards resembling “A yawn of putrid phlegm” (28) discovered by Charlie, Hughes’ companion visiting the river. He yells out: “God! The river is dead! Oh God! / Even the mussels are finished” (32-33), hinting at the death of the river.

Hughes adopts a polemical tone attacking the modern farming methods supported by government policies. Through the character of Peter, a farmer who symbolises the countless others driven by greed, Hughes highlights the exploitation of the mother earth for personal gain. His “three plus / Tons of quality grain” (39-40) is the outcome of heaps of poison, “Three hundredweight of 20-10-10 to the acre/ A hundredweight and a half straight Nitram” (61-62) which he measures as medicines “towards that maximum yield” (54), which finally comes “Into your dish for years” (55). Nitram is an ammonium nitrate fertiliser which does more harm than good if applied at immense concentration.

Hughes attention is not on Peter alone but also describes his nature-destructive neighbour:

His upriver neighbour-just as overwhelmed-
Wades through slurry and silage. Where his dad
Milked a herd of twenty, he milks ninety –
Oozing effluent ‘equal to the untreated
Sewage of a city the size of Gloucester’. (44-48)

The problem of slurry and manure disposable is succinctly expressed in the lines. Farmers are eager to increase their livestock numbers but with the same hectares of land available to them. This leads to the spread of effluent and sewage to a catastrophic limit. Studies show how untreated slurry is 200 times more polluting than human sewage, depleting oxygen levels and thus causing death to numerous river species (“Slurry pollution”).

The poem addresses the issue of farming practices adversely affecting river quality and life. A noticeable feature of this poem is the repetitive use of words “you” and “your” which leads the reader into the literary piece, making him share the responsibility. The reader is discouraged from observing the role of a passive reader, but should accept their part in the implementation of green government policies and farming techniques. Hughes seems to propagate the need for organic or sustainable farming, something which was unheard of during his time.

The second part of the poem titled ‘Nymet’ stands for River Yeo (originally known by this name) which is a tributary of River Taw in Devon, England and the word has a Celtic origin bearing the meaning shrine. This alludes to the sacred quality of the river bearing all life forms. She has been stripped of her opulence, “Drowned in the radioactive Irish Sea” (91) where “the South West Water Authority” (93) and “the Express Dairy Cheese Factory” (96) use the river as a sewer. The river has turned into “A miasma” (98) where it rots and stinks as it has turned into a “fistula of a thousand farms” (110) where the sewage is dumped.

Hughes’s foresight and government’s lax attitude are evident in these lines written in the 1980s, as pollution in rivers like Yeo continues to be reported widely even today. The poem concludes with a grim tone: “More truly: The Washer at the Ford/ As in the old story/The death-rags that she washes and washes are ours” (112-14). Hughes compares the pollution-struck river to ‘The Washer at the Ford’, a figure from Scottish, Welsh and Breton oral tradition who stands for death. She washes blood-stained garments at the ford of a river and turns to tell the beholder that they belong to the observer (“Washer at the Ford”). The image of the Washer at the Ford transforms environmental degradation into a symbolic confrontation with mortality. By suggesting that the death-rags belong to the observer, Hughes “collapses the distinction between the destruction of nature and human self-destruction, emphasising the interconnected fate of humanity and the natural world” (Gifford, “Hughes’s Social Ecology” 82).

Conclusion

Ted Hughes' depiction of rivers serves as a powerful reflection on the complexities of human interaction with the natural world. His work deals with reverence for nature and the destructive impact of industrialisation and pollution. He explores the tension between ecological degradation and renewal, and the themes of the poems analysed here align with the principles of deep ecology, emphasising the interconnectedness of all life and the inherent value of nature, beyond human utility. When read Deep Ecologically, *River* challenges anthropocentric assumptions and presents rivers as living ecological entities rather than passive natural resources. The anthology anticipates many concerns of contemporary ecocriticism and reveals Hughes' vision of humanity as an integral part of the larger ecological whole. *River*, therefore stands as a significant poetic exploration of ecological consciousness, revealing that environmental crisis is closely linked to human beings' relationship with the natural world.

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