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Biocentric equality and Self-realization: A Deep Ecological Study of *My Own True Family* by Ted Hughes

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Abstract

The study aims at exploring the transition from an anthropocentric worldview to ecological consciousness in Ted Hughes's poem *My Own True Family*. Being an ecologically conscious poet, Ted Hughes has depicted the human negligence and their indifference toward nature. Using Arne Naess' core principles of deep ecology, particularly *biocentric equality* and *Self-realization*, the study analyses the non-hierarchical connection between the humans and the non-humans as portrayed by Hughes in his poem. This paper uses 'close reading' as a qualitative approach to foreground the relationships between the child-speaker and the oak trees. It, further, emphasizes on the fact that the magical experience of the child upholds the need of protecting the biological diversity and the biological equality of all species living in an ecosystem. The boy considers the intrinsic value of the oak trees, extending his narrower human ego to a greater ecological "self." The paper concludes that Hughes's *My Own True Family* is a perfect specimen of ecocritical poem, where the survival of humans is inextricably dependent on the protection of the non-humans on earth.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Deep Ecology, Biocentric Equality, Self-realization, Ecocriticism, Ted Hughes, My Own True Family.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the world is facing tremendous blows of ecological devastations. Ecological catastrophes, in terms of fire, flood, draught, deforestation, global warming, pollution, and the threats of nuclear war are no more scattered issues to be ignored (Capra 19). Rather, it demands a quick and wise solution for a sustainable future. However, since last few decades, conservation of nature and its surroundings against anthropocentric activities is always a pressing matter of debate and discussion in the academia. In the 1970s there was a wide acknowledgement of these problems among scholars, which led to the formulation of different scientific and socio-academic groups to come forward with influential doctrines to safeguard our Mother Nature.

Ecocriticism is an environmental philosophy that studies the relationship between literature and the environment (Glotfelty xviii). It studies the interdependence of one species with the other respectively in an environment. The philosophical origin of the term "deep ecology" is firmly rooted in the ecocentric and nature-oriented philosophies such as ecocriticism, social criticism of Henry David Thoreau, Aldous Huxley, and John Muir, and the ecological perspectives of Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson and many other ecologists (Sessions ix). The term "deep ecology" was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in his 1973 essay "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements" to counter the anthropocentric worldview. Although, it is hard to define what deep ecology really is, it does not lack an aim. It is an environmental and social movement that promotes intrinsic value of all living beings irrespective of their cash-drawing utility to humans. It firmly questions the masterdom of anthropocentric worldview and urges for a ecocentric perspective placing humans not at the top of the web of life, but as a mere entity of it like others, emphasizing human-nature correlation and interconnectedness.

In his seminal work "The Deep Ecological Movement", Naess has outlined eight guiding principles of "deep ecology" to promote ecological bonding and interconnectedness among all species. However, he emphasizes on two of the eight core principles—biocentric equality and self-realization—in his Ecosophy.

Naess's concept of *self-realization* or *self- actualization* is a process in which a man expands his mental faculties to recognize his inherent connection with the natural world and develop a pure and greater sense of identity. It involves widening one's identification with all living beings on earth, moving from his narrow ego to a comprehensive ecocentric self. It does not only consider that both human and the non-human are an integral part of the ecosystem without any hierarchy among species, but also advocates for the intrinsic value of all living beings, critiquing the anthropocentric worldview of treating the natural world as a mere source of resource extraction rather than a precious biosphere that harbours life on earth.

On the other hand, biocentric equality posits that in the biosphere every organism has the right to exist, grow, and flourish independently. Each species is unique in its own form and possesses the right to exist without violating the rules of nature for others to live and grow (Broswimmer 6). Every organism has intrinsic worth irrespective of their materialistic cash value to human beings. Therefore, these two core principles of Naess's deep ecology Movement play a crucial role to make us ecologically conscious enough, so that we can uphold the matter of ecological equilibrium and biological diversity. This paper is structured around these core principles of deep ecology to critically evaluate Ted Hughes' poem *My Own True Family*.

Edward James Ted Hughes is one of the prolific poets of the postmodern era who is widely acknowledged for dexterously painting the human-nature interdependence and cohabitation in his finest creations of poetry. *My Own True Family* portrays the magical journey of a young child in an oakwood, and stresses on the fact that both the human and the non-human should be thrived as a single "true family." The plot revolves around a you boy who stealthily enters into an oakwood in search of a "stag", but instead of finding a deer, he transforms into a man of nature being enchanted by the magical spell of "an old woman."

Human Ignorance toward Environment

In the age of the Anthropocene, human desire of infinite wealth at the cost of ecological destruction has reached to the highest peak. The anthropocentric belief that humans are at the centre of the universe leads to the overexploitation of everything in an ecosystem, either for their material gain or for their artistic or sensory gratification. Ted Hughes captures this anthropocentric mindset of humanity in the very opening line of his poem *My Own True Family*, as the speaker says, "Once I crept in an oakwood—I was looking for a stag" (Hughes, line 1). The speaker here is neither a romantic nor a worshiper of nature in any way; rather his quest for a stag into the oakwood bears the marks of anthropocentric greed and desire. On a larger scale, it shows human desire to conquer nature by hunting animals for food or sport.

Hughes has successfully created a magical atmosphere in his poem, where he gives voice to the voiceless to call for human attention on their harmful actions on the environment. The conversation between the oak trees and the speaker represents human indifference toward ecological destruction. The trees say, "We are chopped down, we are cut down, you do not blink an eye" (Hughes, line 8). This accusation of the oak trees reveals the irreparable damage caused by humans on the environment. However, human ignorance towards nature is not new. Nature has been exploited for various purposes and in various forms since the beginning of human civilizations. Even though we solely depend on other species for our existence, we cut trees to satiate our temporary desires without acknowledging the harm we inflict on nature.

Intrinsic Value

The poem indispensably portrays the inherent connection between the speaker and the oak trees. They are not just ordinary trees but the true means of life on earth. They produce our food, wood, and most importantly they produce oxygen we breathe, and absorb carbon dioxide we exhale. The oak trees strongly assert a true connection to the child by claiming, "We are the oak-trees and your own true family" (Hughes, line 7). This claim of the oak trees suggests a strong sense of kinship and emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living beings on earth. Nevertheless, Hughes does not stop here establishing only the true connection between the oak trees and the boy; rather, he goes a step ahead providing authority to the trees to take an oath from the boy by teaching him a lesson of giving back what we take from nature. The oak trees ask the child, "Whenever you see an oak-tree felled, swear now you will plant two" (Hughes, line 10). Through this line Hughes has explicitly portrayed the utter necessity of planting two trees for every one cut down. The poet asks us to be morally responsible to preserve our mother nature by restoring the intrinsic worth of all organisms in an ecosystem for a sustainably strong future.

Although driven by the anthropocentric pursuits humans have surrendered themselves to industrial and technological advancement, they are not distinguished from nature but an integral part of it. It is their indifference toward nature that causes barrenness to their fertile brain. However, Hughes is spiritually awake enough to put his readers back on the right track. Thus the oak trees in this poem threat the boy for his blindness toward environmental degradation: "Unless you make a promise now—now you are going to die" (Hughes, line 9). The promise is to identify oneself as an integral part of nature. The threat of the oak trees is actually a blessing in disguise as it emphasizes the fact that to harm nature is to harm ourselves. The trees gives a clear

warning to the boy that if he does not bring a change in his perception, he will be buried underground from where he will hardly have a chance to grow again. This represents a bitter truth that human destiny is deeply tied to the fate of the forest.

The Spiritual Awakening

Ted Hughes has dexterously used the shamanic elements of a dream vision, an old woman, and a path of spiritual transformation in this poem. He presents these elements not just as magic tricks but as the structural base to put forward his spiritual message. As a shaman travels from the human world to the world of the spirits to bring back knowledge or healing, so what exactly happens to the boy in this poem. The "old woman" acts as a spiritual guide for the boy. She transports him into a visionary trance, a "dream that altered" him, where he becomes "twice awake" to the harsh reality of the natural world. With this journey that facilitates a communicative bridge between species, the boy transcends his human ego and embraces a greater ecological self. It is this shamanic effect that allows the oak trees too to demand an oath of protection from the boy claiming themselves as their "own true family".

The transformation of the child's heart into a tree represents a deeper connection with the environment: "My walk was the walk of a human child, but my heart was a tree" (Hughes, line 15). This concluding line of the poem exemplifies the true realization of a greater self, validating the child's "twice awake" moment as a spiritual awakening. It depicts the shamanic ritual of death and rebirth, where the boy's anthropocentric 'self' dies to embrace the heart of a tree. He remains human in his physical form but his heart transforms into a tree. This spiritual transformation has left a secret mark on the child, reshaping his knowledge of the true relationship with nature. Therefore, the child carries the true essence of kinship gained through the lessons of the oak trees, even after returning to the human company.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Ted Hughes's *My Own True Family* from an ecocritical point of view using two of the core principles of Arne Naess's deep ecology movement. The analysis of the paper reveals that the poem is a journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from exploitation to empathy. The child-speaker has undergone through a transformation, developing his own ecological self and understanding the intrinsic value of all living beings on earth. Structuring the shamanic elements, the poet has successfully delineated the harmful consequences of anthropocentric activities and at the same time, directed his readers, rather entire humanity to re-examine their relationship with nature for the welfare of both the environment and the humanity. Additionally, this paper highlights the point that until we recognize ourselves and our "true family" in the environment, we cannot be truly human.

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