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## The Wings of Change: An Attempt to Trace the Change of Spirit of Age with Reference to Birds in English Poems

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### Abstract:

If God hasn't endowed man with wings, He has bestowed man with no less precious faculty. His *viewless wings of poesy* is such an insurmountable phenomenon that it compensates all other want. His creative faculty has always assumed birds to be a natural objective correlative to his aspiration for freedom and dream. However, with the passage of time as the spirit of life grows complex and intricate the presentation of birds finds a wide range of delineation. Hence, if Keats' nightingale or Shelley's skylark represents romantic idealization and quest for beauty, Hardy's thrush represents a conflicting emotion of pessimism and optimism and Hughes' Hawk represents 'Nature red in tooth and claw' with all its heinous and violent attributes. My attempt in this paper is to trace how different poets have communicated artistically the change of spirit in different ages with the birds selected by them and how the coordination works.

**Keywords: Romantic idealization, Victorianism, Modernism.**

*Birds* have always been fascinating creatures to the imaginative impression of our creative entity. The moment man realizes the value of liberty in life and living, he grows desperate to cling to it. However, the more he tries to grab it in both hands the more it evades. Life on earth within a social decorum is so designed that the free flight of a mind finds it clipped. Down the ages, this consciousness only grows to make him feel his limitation and his inevitable lot of being restrained. On the verge of such realization, if in the free flight of a bird across the parti coloured sky his romantic longing or passion has been fed, the 'hook'd feet' or red claws have also been instrumental in expressing the spirit of cruelty and violence. Thenceforth, poets of different periods well in tune with the spirit of the age have ventilated their emotion of rapture, melancholy and vindictiveness in their verse.

Romantic idealization of life that a Keats or a Shelley champions the best has always made man yearn for a glide in a world of his own- a world where everything is full of bounty and beauty, everything is embalmed with a sensation of satisfaction, a place where desire meets fulfillment. Alas! Such a place he finds nowhere in his range. His futile search only numbs his spirit further. Hence, whenever his eyes meet the flight of a bird and ears listen to the *bell-beat* of its wings he tries to transmit his being into it and assimilate each other into a single whole. Keats, the passionate worshipper of beauty, in his *Ode to a Nightingale* indulges in the *viewless wings of poesy* i.e. (poetic) imagination to come anywhere near to the joy and ecstasy of the nightingale's song.

The gifted melodious grace that the song of the nightingale enjoys is so peerless that the poet is "half in love with easeful death". The impact of the song is so overwhelming and all encompassing that the poet feels a sensation of beauty and reaches the optimum level of sensuous saturation. In a world of "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" the nightingale enkindles in him an impression of 'easeful' end. In the romantic rumination of Keats, even death becomes a beautiful experience, a sensation not to be frightened and abhorred but to be embraced with satisfaction of sense. Thus, an idealization of death appears to be spontaneous expression of sensuous fulfillment.

The anguish of the poet derives from the awareness of the contrast between the poet's failure to overcome stages of stress, crisis and pain in a world where 'palsy shakes a few' and the ecstatic song of the nightingale that soothes and heals the sore heart of people down the ages. The song of the nightingale always seems to be infused with joy and zeal for life in its world; but the poet loses vitality and 'grows pale' in his world.

In Shelley's *To A Skylark*, however, the thought of pain and anguish is not as haunting as in *Ode to Nightingale*. Here the anguish results from the failure of the poet to deduce the source of the 'keen joyance' and 'shrill delight' that the song of the skylark affects upon the poet. The poet identifies the attributes of the bird with an ethereal phenomenon. The skylark surpasses the limitation of the mundane world and thereby, is not affected by the pain, suffering and crisis of life. Whatever be the situation it lingers with the joy of creative spirit and the melodious notes of its song shower upon the world and floods the sensation of the poet and any sensitive soul. The song is so pure that even flimsy shades of mundane constraint find no room in its 'profuse strain'. The skylark is the 'scorner of the ground' and assumes the status of a 'blithe spirit'.

The poet devotes his energy in his quest for the hidden power that inspires the skylark to sing with ecstasy and grace. The poet asserts his belief that the bird is definitely awakened to greater truths of life and the understanding of those verities enables the skylark approach life with absolute joy. Shelley has offered a ponderous reflection on human affliction and agony in mundane world. The skylark is devoid of the same because it, unlike us, neither does "... look before and after / And pine for what is not:" nor is affected by "Hate, pride and fear". Indeed, much of affliction we earn ourselves or we owe our pain and suffering to our thought process. The skylark enjoys the life of a free spirit, a blessed one perhaps because he thinks simply, lives in the present, and knows the absolute truth.

Thus, both the skylark and the nightingale represent an ideal world of beauty and bounty, which both Shelley and Keats seek to embrace but fail to cling to it. Their ardent endeavour to create such an alternative world to suspend the sensation of agonizing reality only proves to be volatile romance with imaginative fervour. However, those moments of 'harmonious madness' and 'ecstasy' make room for escape to an ideal world, a phenomenon that is identified as the hallmark of romantic literature.

The essence of Victorianism borders on brooding sadness, pessimism and melancholy with occasional notes of optimism and assertion. Classical restraint, critical disposition and reflective appraisal of life characterize the literary spirit of the age. I have picked Thomas Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush* as the direction of my paper accommodates well the 'aged, frail and gaunt' bird who sings an 'evensong' on the eve of a new century. "Happiness", says Hardy "is an occasional episode in a general drama of pain" and in this poem, the thrush appears to be the harbinger of optimism with some 'blessed hope' that puffs the spirit of the poet in the midst of disbelief and despair.

The poem has been beautifully balanced between pessimism and optimism, deriving from social reality and decadence. Unlike the skylark who is a 'scorner of the ground' or the nightingale whose presence is only felt, the thrush is more mundane and close to the ground. The Victorian poets (writers) are more socially conscious and alive to the complexities of life, with an awareness of social responsibility, a feature distinctly absent in the Romantics. Hence, Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush* presents a gloomy, pessimistic and worn out world in the first two stanzas with artistic fidelity to reality. The 'broken lyre' is symbolic of the absence of harmony in life and suggestive of the discordant music of life that runs through Victorian ethos. The result is the assertion of the poet to find 'everything as fervourless as I'. Indeed, Victorian society suffers from this lackluster vitality and a sense of disbelief and doubt engulfs everything and everyone. The sequence of epithets used to picturize the physicality of the thrush is well in tune with the spirit of the age.

The pendulum, however, swings. Amid the growing gloom, there suddenly soars up a voice of some 'blessed hope'. The poet is awestruck at the rise of such an 'evensong' of 'joy illimited'. Hardly there exists anything positive or inspiring at the backdrop and this stark absence makes the poet realize that the thrush like the skylark or the nightingale must know the source of some hidden power, which to people like the poet remains unintelligible. Definitely, this unawareness makes things gloomy and pensive; but the silver line of hope is that there is the existence of the rejuvenating power somewhere. The interplay between faith and doubt, pessimism and optimism colour the poem in the peculiar tincture of Victorianism.

**Hawk Roosting**, a representative poem of the modern era couriers well the literary ethos of the twentieth century. Modern literature is a sort of collage work, harbouring together multiple aspects. If this multiplicity of issues makes it intricate, it also makes modern literature interesting. One of the most prominent issues to shape the corpus of modern literature is the exercise of violence, its effect and the psychology that promotes such violence. Ted Hughes, however, in an interview to *London Magazine* in January 1971 identifies Nature, the cruel and the whimsical temperament of Nature through the hawk: "Nature red in tooth and claw". What he suggests is that through the hawk he represents the violent aspect of Nature, unlike the Nature that finds expression in Wordsworthian vista. Indeed, his predatory nature is far away from the Nature that we are accustomed to find in poetic expressions, in general.

Though he says in the same interview "Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking"; unmistakably the Hawk invites many a political suggestion. The political analogy finds sustenance from few references in the text and the social backdrop of the contemporary world. In fact, the relevance of the poem only finds wider circumference with the political association and with due respect to the poet I would like to infer the aspects of the poem from the political perspective besides what Hughes has to say about his poem.

The hawk, a bird of prey is symbolic of the power mongers of the modern era who share the same singularity of thought process and lust for authority. They always want to sit on the top of the social hierarchy and govern the world of their own accord. Their desire is to hold the whole creation under their control and thus be the lord and commander of this world. When the hawk claims 'it's all mine' with aggression and atrocity the famous line of Louis xiv *la etat cest moi*, which is "I am the state" rings out unmistakably. History of human civilization is replete with many such historical characters who have proved themselves to be the image of death. Common and innocent people have been the victims of their lust. The more they satisfy their lust by exercising their power, the more they become blood thirsty.

This practice of violence is so intoxicating that the hawk does not want any change. Power mongers of all time have been of the same nature; they too want to maintain the 'status quo' and enjoy power uninterruptedly. In today's world the hawk has become hawks; they have grown in number. Superpowers of the world politics have assumed the role of the hawk and in the previous few decades, the singularity of desire of the hawk '*it is all mine*' has become the political credo of these power mongers. Even when the hawk claims to 'rehearse perfect kills' from his top most position of the tree we find an obvious identification of the testing of missiles and bombs as the dress rehearsals of wars going on round the world. In fact, after the nuclear holocaust, the world is getting roasted day in day out by such hawks in the fire of their lust for power and the word 'Roosting' in the title **Hawk Roosting** can be interpreted with this suggestion of roasting. Thus, **Hawk Roosting** gives expression to the spirit of the age- an age burning in the fire of violence and atrocity.

To conclude, it can be said that birds like the skylark, the nightingale, the thrush or the hawk with their characteristics cater well the quintessence of the ages in which they have been presented. The poets have aptly synchronized their choice and the wings of these different birds carry us to different ports of suggestion with aesthetic beauty, fidelity to reality and exposure to naked violence.

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