

Grammar in Free Fall: Syntactic Collapse in Ted Hughes's

The Hawk in the Rain

Ted Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain* ends with a strange grammatical breakdown. At the moment when the hawk falls, the grammar also collapses:

*Coming from the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,
Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,
The horizon traps him; the round angelic eye
Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land.*

Why does this happen? The final irregular verbs mirror the hawk's physical loss of control through a breakdown of syntax. In this way, Hughes shows that the violence of nature can disrupt language itself.

Before we delve into the final stanza, let us first have a look at the earlier part of the poem, which is necessary because it gives the hawk a position of apparent control. The speaker is stuck in mud and rain, dragging his feet through a land that seems to swallow him. The hawk, by contrast, is high above this struggle. It "hangs his still eye" and appears to hold "all creation" in "weightless quiet". These phrases make the hawk seem almost free from the forces that trap the speaker. Yet the poem does not present the hawk as peaceful. It is placed at the "master- / Fulcrum of violence". The hawk is powerful because it seems to balance violence, instead of escaping violence. This matters for the ending. When the hawk falls, what collapses is not only a bird's body, but a whole position of mastery: height, stillness, vision, and control.

The final stanza first destroys this sense of power by changing the hawk from an active creature into a suffering one. The hawk "meets the weather" coming from the wrong way and "suffers the air, hurled upside down". Earlier, air is the space in which the hawk holds itself. Now air becomes something the hawk must "suffer". This is the first stage of the collapse. Before the grammar breaks, the relation between body and world has already changed. "Hurled upside down" also makes the loss of control visual. If the hawk is upside down, then the world it sees is also upside down. The

“still eye” from the earlier part of the poem is no longer a stable center of vision. The bird’s body and its perception are both turned upside down.

The phrase “Fall from his eye” turns this physical reversal into grammatical confusion. What is confusing is that “Fall” does not have a stable subject. If the hawk is falling, the grammar would normally be “falls”; if “the ponderous shires” are falling, then the noun comes too late and is immediately given another verb “crash”. The line therefore allows several readings at once. The hawk falls from the sky; the land seems to fall from the hawk’s eye; the hawk’s power of vision itself falls apart.

The next two clauses show how completely the original scene has reversed. The shires and the horizon are not ordinary things that act on their own. They are parts of the landscape, things that should be seen from a distance. But in the fall they become forces that move against the hawk. “The ponderous shires crash on him” and “The horizon traps him”. The grammar reflects this reversal by making the land and horizon the ones doing the action, while the hawk becomes the object.

The last line pushes the breakdown further: “Smashed, mix his heart’s blood with the mire of the land”. “Smashed” is grammatically suspended. It most directly describes the “round angelic eye”, but it can also describe the hawk as a whole. The word stands at the beginning of the line as the result of impact before the sentence has fully explained the action. Then “mix” appears without a correct verb ending. If the “eye” is the subject, normal grammar would require “mixes.” If the land or horizon is the subject, the connection is still unclear. The verb seems to use only the base form of the verb. This is where the poem’s grammar most clearly matches the hawk’s physical injury. Just as the hawk’s blood is mixed with the mire, the sentence mixes subject, action, and object. The final line does not give the reader a clean grammatical sequence because the scene itself is no longer cleanly separable into bird, land, and action.

This ending also returns to the beginning of the poem. The speaker begins in mud, struggling against a land that pulls at his body. The hawk seems above that condition, but the final word “mire” brings the hawk down into the same material world. The fall therefore erases the difference between the speaker’s low, muddy

struggle and the hawk's high control. Hughes does not simply kill the hawk; he breaks the symbolic position that the hawk seemed to occupy. Its height and vision cannot finally protect it from the material force of the land.

By examining earlier published versions, we can see this grammar collapse is deliberate rather than a careless writing error. In the 1957 Atlantic version, published as *The Hawk in the Storm* the line reads "The horizon trap him".¹ In the current version used today, it becomes "The horizon traps him". This change corrects one verb. Hughes gives "horizon" the expected singular verb form, but the other irregularities remain: "Fall from his eye" is still unstable, and "mix his heart's blood" still doesn't follow normal grammar rules. The revision makes the collapse more selective. The grammar is fixed where the horizon acts, but remains unstable around the eye, the smashed body, and the blood. This suggests that Hughes wanted the deepest grammatical disturbance to stay close to the hawk's loss of vision and body.

This focused breakdown seems consistent with Hughes's larger poetic method. Terry Gifford characterizes Hughes's early work as "anti-pastoral," which refuses a gentle or comforting view of nature.² Part of what makes it anti-pastoral, I would suggest, is that it also tends to reject the linguistic forms through which pastoral poetry usually uses to depict nature — the smooth syntax, the balanced clauses, the clear subject-object relations that imply a world where violence can be contained by order. By disturbing those forms precisely at the moment of physical impact, Hughes appears to turn grammar into something that participates in the violence, rather than simply recording it from a safe distance. The Poetry Archive notes that *The Hawk in the Rain* marks a shift toward the harsher rhythms and diction of Anglo-Saxon poetry.³ That tradition itself often prioritizes alliterative force over syntactic regularity, leaning more toward the physical weight of words than the logical transparency of sentence structure. In this context, the final stanza's broken

¹ Ted Hughes, "The Hawk in the Storm," *The Atlantic*, February 1957, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1957/02/the-hawk-in-the-storm/641153/

² Gifford, Terry. 2009. Ted Hughes. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group. Accessed June 18, 2026. ProQuest Ebook Central.

³ Poetry Archive, "Ted Hughes," accessed June 18, 2026, <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/ted-hughes/>.

grammar is part of Hughes's attempt to make poetic language more physical, more exposed, and less neatly controlled. Grammar, which usually gives order to experience, becomes vulnerable to the same force that destroys the hawk. If nature cannot be safely contained by civilized language, then language itself might be dragged into the same fall.

The hawk falls, and grammar falls with it. The "angelic eye" that once seemed to hold the world at a distance is smashed into blood and mire, and the sentence can no longer keep its own order. In this collapse, Hughes does more than describe a violent natural event. He lets primitive force break through the rational grammar that would normally contain it. The poem ends, therefore, not with language mastering nature, but with language dragged down into nature's own law.