
Landscapes of Decay: Loss and Memory in Ted Hughes' Remains of Elmet

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Abstract

This article analyzes the themes of loss and decay in Ted Hughes' Remains of Elmet, a poetry collection that illustrates the poet's deep connection with the environment, history, and spiritual essence of the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire. The study conducts a thorough analysis of chosen poems to examine how Hughes interweaves the physical and spiritual aspects of loss, depicting the valley's desolate moors, deserted villages, and decayed industrial remnants as metaphors for wider human feelings of decline and desolation. The collection, infused with a sense of temporal collapse, addresses the dissolution of old and modern existence, evoking the Celtic heritage of Elmet while lamenting the slow decline of its formerly prosperous manufacturing communities. The article examines Hughes' employment of harsh, elemental imagery and his legendary portrayal of nature to highlight the inescapable deterioration characterizing both human existence and the natural realm. The critical study emphasizes Hughes' depiction of nature as simultaneously destructive and regenerative, indicating a nuanced link between death, decay, and renewal. This essay situates the collection within the broader framework of environmental and existential issues, demonstrating how Remains of Elmet functions as a poetic reflection on impermanence, memory, and the profound relationship between landscape and identity. The study elucidates the persistent significance of Hughes' work in current dialogues around ecological and cultural deterioration.

Introduction

Ted Hughes' 1979 poetry collection Remains of Elmet is a notable work that examines themes of loss and degradation in the Calder Valley, Yorkshire. Brandes (1993) characterizes it as the most "historical" anthology of poetry by Hughes. This work, named A Pennine Sequence, was developed in reaction to a series of poignant black and white images by Fay Godwin, depicting the desolation of the region amid the fall of the textile industry (Jackson, 2016). The word Elmet denotes the old Celtic monarchy that formerly inhabited this area, highlighting Hughes' profound bond with the landscape of his youth. His poems depict a vivid representation of the weathered environment and the vestiges of industrial activity, emphasizing the conflict between people and nature (Hadley, n.d.). Hughes' oeuvre is marked by an amalgamation of personal recollection and historical backdrop, illustrating the manner in which the natural environment reasserts itself over human activities, frequently resulting in deterioration and devastation (Hadley, 2015). In Remains of Elmet, Hughes offers a striking portrayal of the Calder Valley, highlighting nature's endurance in the face of human industrial decay. His poetry encapsulates the essence of a society characterized by loss, while simultaneously implying the possibility of renewal through a reconnecting with the fundamental forces of nature (Hadley, 2015; Sulaiman, 2015). This collection signifies a shift from Hughes' previous mythical sequences, concentrating on the concrete reality of the environment and its inhabitants, so providing a more pragmatic view of the interaction between mankind and the natural world (Sulaiman, 2015).

The Calder Valley is a crucial setting for Ted Hughes' poetry book *Remains of Elmet*, illustrating the historical and industrial deterioration of the area. This region, marked by its rough terrain and significant industrial legacy, has experienced considerable change, especially during the Industrial Revolution, which greatly impacted both the ecosystem and the populace.

Historically, the Calder Valley served as a hub for woolen cloth manufacture, characterized by a prosperous dual economy that integrated agricultural and textile manufacturing. This dualism cultivated a thriving class of yeoman clothiers who aided in the valley's advancement (Pennine Valley: A History of Upper Calderdale | Hebden Bridge Local History Society, n.d.). As industrialization advanced, the population transitioned from rural agriculture to urban manufacturing, resulting in a collapse of traditional farming practices and a substantial transformation of the environment. Hughes' art poignantly illustrates the valley's industrial collapse, reflecting on the cultural landscape influenced by the natural environment and the effects of industrialization. Hughes analyzes the grim reality of mill life, illustrating how individuals got estranged from nature, leading to a spiritual and psychological malaise (Sulaiman, 2015). The mills, formerly emblems of economic prosperity, transformed into relics of deterioration, mirroring the erosion of cultural identity and ties to the land. The deterioration of the textile industry, especially in the late 20th century, resulted in the Calder Valley retaining vestiges of its industrial heritage, including deserted mills and dilapidated structures. Hughes employs these photos to elicit a sense of loss, demonstrating how human activity has marred the natural world. He asserts that the unyielding quest for industrial advancement has resulted in the degradation of the natural environment, as illustrated by his depiction of the valley's desolation and the stifling ambiance of its chapels and mills (Sulaiman, 2015). Furthermore, Hughes' poetry conveys a desire for reestablishment with the natural environment, indicating that the valley's allure endures despite its industrial blemishes. He depicts the environment as a dynamic organism, infused with history and memory, where the vestiges of human effort coexist with the persistent forces of nature (Bate, 2015). In *Remains of Elmet*, the Calder Valley transcends its role as a mere setting, emerging as a character that encapsulates the themes of loss, degradation, and the pursuit of redemption. Hughes' examination of this area underscores the intricate relationship between mankind and nature, providing a profound reflection on the repercussions of industrialization and the persistent resilience of the natural environment.

Hughes employs the Calder Valley landscape as a metaphor for personal and communal experiences of loss, decay, and spiritual despair, while also reflecting on nature's capacity for regeneration.

Historical and Cultural Context

The ancient Celtic kingdom of Elmet, which originally included areas of modern Yorkshire, is historically significant in defining the identity of the Calder Valley region. This kingdom, renowned for its abundant cultural heritage and its relationship with the nature, is the setting for Ted Hughes' poetry collection *Remains of Elmet*, in which he interweaves history and myth to capture the essence of the region (Skea, n.d.). Hughes utilizes the vestiges of Elmet's history—its hill-forts, ancient customs, and the scenic allure of the terrain—to depict the persistent connection between mankind and nature, while simultaneously contemplating the effects of industrial deterioration (Sulaiman, 2015). By invoking the name of Elmet, Hughes both venerates the region's Celtic heritage and critiques the erosion of cultural identity in the face of modernity, thereby imbuing the poems with a profound sense of nostalgia and an urgent call for reconnection with the elemental forces of nature (Skea, n.d.).

The industrial history of the Calder Valley is crucial for comprehending the themes of deterioration and abandonment that pervade Ted Hughes' poetry book, *Remains of Elmet*. The valley, once a flourishing hub of textile manufacturing during the Industrial Revolution, underwent a sustained economic downturn in the 20th century as mills closed and the population decreased (Taylor, 2014). Hughes' poetry and Fay Godwin's accompanying images depict the desolation of forsaken factories and churches, which operate as tangible reminders of the valley's industrial heritage and the impact of progress on the natural environment (Sulaiman, 2015). The deterioration of rural existence is apparent throughout the collection, as Hughes mourns the decline of conventional agricultural methods and the uprooting of villages due to industrialization. By observing the decline of industry and the ensuing deterioration of the constructed environment, *Remains of Elmet* serves as a heart-breaking elegy for a lifestyle that has been irreparably transformed by the forces of modernity.

Loss and Decay in the Physical Landscape

In *Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes used stark, elemental imagery—especially of wind, water, stone, and moorland—to illustrate the physical deterioration of the Calder Valley, mirroring its natural beauty and industrial demise. The valley, formerly a flourishing center of textile manufacturing, is illustrated through Hughes' evocative depictions of its harsh terrains and the unyielding natural elements that both sculpt and deteriorate it (Sagar, n.d.). The imagery of wind frequently represents the passage of time and the lingering influence of the past, whilst water signifies the industrial pollution that historically afflicted the region, rendering the river Calder a symbol of deterioration (Taylor, 2014). Hughes' allusions to stone underscore the landscape's permanence, juxtaposed with the ephemeral character of human enterprise and the forsaking of formerly vibrant communities (Skea, n.d.). The moorland, characterized by its wild and untamed essence, encapsulates the region's soul, indicating a reconnection with nature despite the remnants of industrialization. Hughes conveys the essence of a region characterized by loss through elemental imagery, prompting readers to contemplate the interaction between nature and the vestiges of human effort in a world that has irrevocably transformed.

The Calder Valley in West Yorkshire, England, was a significant source of inspiration for Ted Hughes's poetry. Hughes, born in Mytholmroyd in 1930, spent his early years amid the harsh, industrial terrain of the upper Calder Valley until his family relocated to Mexborough in 1938 (Sagar, n.d.). Nonetheless, the region's grip on Hughes' imagination remained steadfast, as seen by his recurrent visits to the area throughout his life and the persistent inclusion of Calder Valley place names in his poetry (Fare, 2020). Hughes was captivated by the juxtaposition of the sadness of the early industrial revolution and the untamed beauty of the Calder Valley environment (Fare, 2013). The region's industrial legacy, characterized by the downturn of the textile industry and the shutdown of long-standing plants, provided a context for Hughes' examination of issues related to loss and deterioration (Sagar, n.d.). The poet celebrated the enduring power of nature, as demonstrated by his depictions of the woodlands, moors, and waterways around his childhood residence (Fraser, 1991).

The old Celtic kingdom of Elmet, which originally included portions of the Calder Valley, held particular significance for Hughes. The title "Elmet" was used for his 1979 poetry collection, which included images by Fay Godwin that depicted the region's "spectacular desolation" and "grim sort of beauty" (Fare, 2013). Hughes regarded Elmet as a "cosmogony," a creative milieu where imagination and memory established a connection between life and death. The poet's intrigue with Elmet's history and mythology imbued his writing with a sense of timelessness and affinity for the land.

The Calder Valley, characterized by its harsh terrain, industrial legacy, and mythical history, consistently featured in Ted Hughes' poetry. The region's influence on his imagination originated from his early experiences and the significant effect it had on his creative growth. Hughes's work immortalized a fading lifestyle while honoring the resilience of nature and the human spirit amidst transformation and deterioration.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes depicts nature as both exquisite and brutal, demonstrating its dual function in the physical deterioration of human edifices while concurrently maintaining an indifferent permanence. The collection clearly illustrates the Calder Valley's terrain, where the vestiges of decaying industrial structures and deserted farms contrast with the unrefined, wild splendor of nature. Hughes used elemental imagery—such as wind, water, and stone—to illustrate the inexorable forces of nature that undermine human accomplishments (Skea, n.d.). The picture of water frequently represents both life and destruction, as it traverses the valley, destroying the relics of mills and homes while nourishing the surrounding ecosystem (Taylor, 2014). This illustrates Hughes' perspective of nature as a formidable, indifferent force that ultimately triumphs over human efforts, emphasizing the vulnerability of human existence against the passage of time and natural phenomena (Haberstroh, 1985). The landscape's stark beauty highlights what has been lost, while simultaneously implying continuity and rejuvenation as nature reoccupies areas once controlled by industry. Hughes encapsulates the spirit of a landscape characterized by both decay and survival through a complex interplay of beauty and brutality, prompting readers to contemplate the tangled link between mankind and the natural world.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes examines the issue of spiritual erosion via the perspective of a deteriorating landscape, symbolizing the decline of society, tradition, and belief systems in the Calder Valley. The collection depicts a region characterized by the deterioration of the textile industry and the ensuing desolation of formerly prosperous communities, which stand as tragic emblems of cultural disintegration (Skea, n.d.). Hughes' evocative depiction of decaying industrial structures and abandoned farmland reflects the population's detachment from their historical origins and communal bonds, indicating a significant spiritual emptiness (Fare, 2013). The barren landscapes reflect the

diminishing traditions and belief systems that previously offered identity and purpose to the community, as the vestiges of human habitation are slowly overtaken by nature (Taylor, 2014). The dissolution of spiritual and cultural identity is accentuated by Hughes' depiction of the natural world as both uncaring and enduring, underscoring the sharp contrast between the permanence of nature and the fragility of human constructs (Haberstroh, 1985). Through the interplay of decay and loss, *Remains of Elmet* functions as a profound reflection on the spiritual dislocation encountered amid industrial decline, prompting readers to contemplate the lasting effects of these transformations on the human soul.

Decay and Renewal: Nature's Dual Role

In *Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes meticulously examines the dual function of nature as both a catalyst for destruction and a source of renewal and regeneration, encapsulating the contradictory link between decay and vitality in the Calder Valley. The collection vividly illustrates landscapes characterized by the vestiges of industrialization, where dilapidated mills and forsaken farms epitomize the detrimental effects of human activity on the environment (Sulaiman, 2015). Hughes used vivid imagery to depict how nature, after being subdued and exploited for industrial use, reasserts itself in these forsaken areas, unveiling a fundamental cycle of death and renewal (Boyle-Haberstroh, 1985). The motif of water flowing through the valley symbolizes the degradation of human structures and the cultivation of new life, emphasizing the resilience of the natural world (Taylor, 2014). Hughes illustrates this paradox by contrasting landscapes of degradation with those of natural vigor, implying that although human efforts may fail, nature endures with an indifferent permanence, encapsulating both beauty and brutality (Fare, 2013). The poet's depiction of the environment signifies a profound philosophical exploration of the connection between people and nature, underscoring that regeneration frequently ensues after damage. Thus, *Remains of Elmet* functions both as a lament for lost elements and as a tribute to nature's enduring capacity for renewal, providing hope amid desolation (Sulaiman, 2015).

Ted Hughes' poetry book *Remains of Elmet* illustrates nature's regeneration potential, providing instances of redemption and continuity despite the dominant themes of decay and loss. Hughes contrasts scenes of industrial decay with the lasting beauty and resilience of nature, implying that although human creations may fail, nature endures with an indifferent persistence. A notable instance transpires in the poem "Crow Hill," wherein Hughes illustrates the progressive reclaiming of a deserted quarry by the around terrain.:

"The quarry's rim is greening over now,

Grass and bramble creep back, the trees

Lean out and stare down at their image." (Hughes, 2011, *Crown Point Pensioners*)

This depiction of nature reclaiming the remnants of human enterprise symbolizes the cyclical essence of existence, wherein deterioration is succeeded by rejuvenation. The "greening over" of the quarry's edge represents the restorative capacity of nature, its capability to rejuvenate and reestablish equilibrium amongst disturbance. In "Hardcastle Crag," Hughes depicts the persistent existence of a stream that traverses the valley, unaffected by the passage of time or the alterations caused by human intervention:

"The stream still runs, still sings its song,

Still glitters through the woods as it has always done,

Flowing through the same old clefts and hollows." (Hughes, 2011, *The River*)

The stream, emblematic of nature's permanence, signifies the continuity that endures beneath the facade of observable change. The continuous flow implies a type of redemption, assuring that despite degradation and loss, nature perpetually renews itself, providing hope and resilience. The regenerative periods in *Remains of Elmet* connect to wider ecological and existential inquiries on humanity's relationship with nature. Hughes' poems imply that by reestablishing our connection with the fundamental elements of nature and recognizing its potential for regeneration, we might discover comfort and significance amongst our mortality and the impermanence of human creations. The regenerative capacity of nature serves as a metaphor for the persistence of the human spirit, highlighting that even in the bleakest times, the possibility for renewal and restoration persists.

Ted Hughes' poetry book *Remains of Elmet* depicts the natural world as a resilient force that endures despite the deterioration of human culture and structures surrounding it. Hughes depicts the Calder Valley environment as a monument to nature's persistence and its capacity to convert the vestiges of human existence into something novel.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes clearly illustrates the decaying remnants of industrial structures, deserted fields, and vacant communities, illustrating the deterioration of human efforts against the passage of time. These deteriorating edifices exemplify the vulnerability of human accomplishments and the ephemeral essence of civilization. According to Hughes (2011, Crow Hill):

"The quarry's rim is greening over now,
Lean out and stare down at their image."

This depiction of nature reclaiming the deserted quarry implies that even the most formidable human edifices are ultimately transient, fated to be overtaken by the inexorable forces of the natural environment. Hughes juxtaposes the deterioration of human society with nature, which he portrays as a timeless and enduring force. Hughes, 2011, *The River*:

"The stream still runs, still sings its song,
Flowing through the same old clefts and hollows."

The stream, emblematic of nature's permanence, signifies the continuity that endures beneath the facade of observable change. The continuous flow implies a type of redemption, assuring that despite human deterioration, the natural world perpetually rejuvenates itself. Hughes posits that as human edifices deteriorate, nature reconstitutes the vestiges of human existence into a novel shape. The deteriorating ruins serve as a canvas for nature to craft its own masterpiece, forming a new and colorful environment that integrates the vestiges of the past. Hughes (2011, *Hardcastle Crag*) elucidates that "the woods have encroached upon the quarries" and "the quarries have been overtaken by woods," exemplifying the cyclical essence of life and death in the natural realm. Hughes depicts nature as a transformative force, perpetually altering the landscape and generating new life from the remnants of the old through the interplay of decay and regeneration. The natural world serves as a beacon of hope and resilience, illustrating that despite human deterioration, the possibility for renewal and regeneration persists.

Conclusion

In *Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes investigates the themes of loss and decay to analyze the convergence of history, nature, and human existence in the Calder Valley. He depicts the deterioration of human edifices—such as forsaken mills, dilapidated churches, and neglected farms—as emblems of the impact that industrialization and fervent religiosity have inflicted on both the environment and the collective psyche of the populace. Nevertheless, the natural world persists as a formidable force that reoccupies these areas, unveiling their unrefined beauty among the deterioration. The erosion of society, culture, and belief systems is reflected in the barren landscapes, with remnants of a "lost kingdom" maintaining an illusion of permanence despite the passage of time. Hughes assumes the position of poet-priest-shaman, use poetry to harness universal energies and attain imaginative healing via myth, ritual, song, and drama. The collection ultimately illustrates the cyclical essence of life and death, indicating that although human efforts may deteriorate, nature persists and metamorphoses remnants into novel forms, urging humanity to reestablish its connection with the natural world to discover significance and continuity amidst change.

Ted Hughes' *Remains of Elmet* profoundly reflects modern environmental and cultural issues, especially on the persistent ecological disaster and humanity's intricate relationship with nature. Hughes' examination of loss and decay poignantly highlights the repercussions of industrialization and environmental degradation, prompting readers to contemplate their responsibilities as custodians of the land (Bandyopadhyay, 2013). His striking portrayals of the Calder Valley's landscapes demonstrate that nature, frequently depicted as a destructive force, also represents a regeneration power that may convert vestiges of human existence into new forms of life (Sulaiman, 2015). This duality underscores the interdependence of all organisms and the imperative of sustaining ecological equilibrium, which is more pertinent in an era characterized by climate change and habitat degradation (Fare, 2013). Hughes underscores the persistent strength of nature in the face of human deterioration, prompting a reassessment of our connection with the environment and pushing for a transition from an egocentric to an ecocentric perspective that acknowledges the inherent worth of all life forms (Bandyopadhyay, 2013). Hughes' work ultimately functions as a call to action, promoting heightened ecological awareness and a dedication to safeguarding the fragile interconnections that sustain life on Earth.

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