

Obituary: Ted Hughes (1930-1998)

The passing of a 20th century poet

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Ted Hughes, Britain's Poet Laureate and easily the most well-known poet of his generation, died of cancer last October 28. Only his closest family and circle of friends knew of Hughes' illness.

Born August 17, 1930 in Mytholmroyd, a former mill town in the Yorkshire Pennines, Hughes came from humble origins, his father a World War I veteran, carpenter and later shop-keeper. Whatever drove Hughes to become a poet, one of the main influences he cited was the musicality of the West Yorkshire dialect: 'Whatever other speech you grow up into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. It makes some things more difficult... since it's your childhood self there inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it. Some things it makes easier. Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse.'

As a young man, after two years in the Air Force, Hughes studied English literature at Pembroke College, Cambridge. Dissatisfied with the course, he switched to archeology and anthropology. After graduating in 1954, Hughes worked as a gardener, zoo attendant and script reader for J. Arthur Rank film studios whilst working on the poems that later formed his first book.

In Cambridge, Hughes met Sylvia Plath, a young American then studying in Britain on a Fulbright scholarship. Both had read and admired each other's poetry before they met. They married within a few months, in June 1956, and in 1957 moved to the US where Hughes taught English and creative writing at the University of Massachusetts.

In 1957 Hughes won the US Poetry Centre First Publication prize. The judges were Stephen Spender, Marianne Moore and W.H. Auden. The prize was publication by Harpers of his first book *The Hawk in the Rain*.

Plath, to whom it was dedicated, wrote: 'His book can't

be typed...He combines intellect and grace of complex form, with lyrical music, male vigor and vitality, and moral commitment and love and awe of the world.'

The images that linger are of forms of entrapment, of the essence of the yearning to be free, of thought as elusive, of nature as untameable. Perhaps the most striking in the collection is 'The Jaguar':

'.....at a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom--
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
By the gang of blood in the brain deaf the ear--
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell'

The Harpers prize gave him the right to seek a publisher in Britain where he successfully submitted the book to Faber, and won the acclaim of T.S. Eliot.

His early promise as a young writer came through in radio plays; a children's book of verse, *Meet my Folks*; and radio readings of his poetry. Hughes, who was acclaimed as 'Poet of the Year', shunned the publicity and rejected BBC-TV interviews. In 1960 his second book of poems *Lupercal* won him the prestigious Hawthornden award, which was presented to him by C.Day Lewis.

Hughes' impact was compared to that of his contemporaries--writers such as John Osborne and Alan Sillitoe. His partnership with Plath spurred them both to ever-greater efforts. Its sorrowful end has passed into the annals of literary history.

Plath's tragic suicide in 1963 reverberated in Hughes work. While he published no poetry for three years, he edited Plath's *Ariel*, the collection that established her name internationally.

In *Wodwo* (1967), Hughes' next collection of poetry, he returned to earlier themes--examining entrapment and nature with a greater intensity. In the powerful title poem, a consciousness fights to find form. His 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' revisits the caged zoo animal Hughes had

observed in his first book:

'Muttering some mantrah, some drum-song of murder
To keep his rage brightening..'

Hughes' personal suffering deepened when his companion, Assia Wevill killed herself and their daughter Shura in 1969. *Crow*, written in 1970 and dedicated 'to Assia and Shura', marks the descent of his poetry into a desperate abyss.

While acclaimed by some, the derisory mocking voice of the *Crow* is somewhat false, almost contrived or staged. This quality arose, not just from the deep sense of futility and nihilism that beset Hughes at this time, but a more deep-seated malaise that affected many of his contemporaries.

The years in which Hughes suffered much public castigation, especially at the hands of radical feminists who claimed he was responsible for Plath's death and had censored her work, was a time when poetry was increasingly marginalised in society. Hughes' response was to turn inwards.

He began to long for the days of the bards of ancient Britain--a period when poets were at the hub of society, exerting enormous powers and influence over their listeners. Hughes wove poems around symbols expressing this yearning for the ancient past. In *Remains of Elmet* (1979) he invoked a lost kingdom of West Yorkshire where the harsh and isolated environment dominated the lives of its inhabitants.

He often expressed hostility towards sterile industrialised existence, sometimes almost childishly, as in his poem 'Tractor' from the *Moortown* collection:

'I squirt commercial sure-fire
Down the black throat--it just coughs.
It ridicules me--a trap of iron stupidity
I've stepped into...'

In an interview in the *Guardian* he said: 'My poems are not about violence but vitality... about the split personality of modern man, the one behind the constructed, spoilt part.'

Hughes escaped from insularity by the diversity of his work. Throughout his career he wrote extensively for children and had a deep insight into childhood imagination. His poetry readings exclusively for children became legendary. His command of poetic form in language also enabled him to produce acclaimed translations from Latin of Seneca's play *Oedipus* (1969) and most recently *Tales from Ovid* (1997).

In *The River* (1983) Hughes' poems were coupled with photographs in an unexciting edition of his work.

Notwithstanding the uninspiring photos, the words dance from the page and we can see what he saw, as in 'That Morning':

'Two gold bears came down and swam like men
Beside us. And dived like children.
And stood in deep water as on a throne
Eating pierced salmon off their talons.'

D.H. Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* poems find an echo in Hughes' animals and plants. Like Lawrence, Hughes shunned the trappings of the lionised writer, strangely uncomfortable as Poet Laureate, a position he was awarded in 1984.

But the public figure and the poetic persona were finally fused in his last great book of poetry, *Birthday Letters*, released in February this year. The book has proved to be a publishing triumph, having already sold 100,000 copies in hardback edition in Britain alone. This marks a resurgent interest in poetry.

Seemingly silent and aloof while attacks on him over Plath's death raged about his head for years, Hughes was meanwhile salting away the poems that would make up the *Birthday Letters* collection. It is now clear he determined to publish the collection when he learnt he was dying himself. His life's work was fulfilled and his place in 20th century English letters was assured. Accumulated in these writings were his offerings to his poetic muse, laid out finally for public scrutiny, triumphant and deceptively simple.

The poem 'Fingers' is a perfect example of Hughes' great talent:

'I remember your fingers. And your daughter's
Fingers remember your fingers
In everything they do.
Her fingers obey and honour your fingers,
The Lares and Penates of our house.'

Hughes is survived by his and Plath's children, Frieda and Nicholas Hughes, and by his second wife, Carol Orchard.

See Also:

A review of Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes
Memories of Sylvia Plath
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