



# Ted Hughes

(1930-1998)

## Life and works

Ted Hughes is regarded as **the most important exponent of the 'Group'** (→ 7.7), though some critics tend to isolate him from any current of the period, as a unique phenomenon.

He was born in Yorkshire in 1930 and studied at Cambridge, where he became deeply interested in archaeology and anthropology. These studies contributed to his poetry, whose origins Hughes traced back to some pre-human animal world.

After graduating, he went to work in London, drifting through a number of jobs, including that of zoo attendant. Before publishing **his first collection of 'animal poems'**, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), he met and **married the American poet Sylvia Plath** (→ Route 13) in 1956. They went to live in the USA, where Sylvia taught Literature and Ted English and Creative Writing. The couple returned to England in 1959.

After his wife's suicide, Ted Hughes stopped writing poetry for nearly three years. In 1967 he published *Wodwo*, which contains some short stories, the radio play *The Wound*, some animal poems and others inspired by his fascination of primitive poetry, runic spells and ancient myths. A new book of verse appeared in 1970, *Crow*. Following this, Hughes published many volumes of prose and poetry, which show a return to earth after the projections into myths. His last work of poetry was *Birthday Letters* (1998) addressed to Sylvia Plath; these poems, written over a period of more than twenty-five years, deal largely with the poet's love for his wife and Plath's psychological drama that led her to suicide. In 1984 he was appointed Poet Laureate. He died in 1998.

## Themes

Hughes came to maturity during the immediate post-war period. His imagination is permanently haunted by the First World War, in which his father fought, and which is the subject of some poems. **This involvement in modern European history** may be read as the original impulse behind his poetry.

Hughes **rejected the simple, insular poetry** embodied by Larkin (→ 7.12) and **chose a sharp verse centred on the rough and violent life of animals as well as men**, who struggle for life against death, or to find a balance within an unromantic nature.

Although **the setting** in place of his poems is nearly always **nature** and **the actors animals**, Hughes is hardly a nature poet in the way the Romantic nature poets were. **His nature is not a refuge from the corrupted, civilised world of industrialism, but a powerful and continuous force** of which his contemporaries are a part. **Hughes's animals are metaphors of human experiences**; they are described from within and they generally prevail over man, since they are pure instinct and have no conscience or rational thinking capacity to hold them back from action. An animal violence is not identified with any specific historical or social reality, but is perceived as a universal, natural force. **This natural energy should be controlled by religion**, but, as Christianity is no longer available, man cannot rely on its traditional strength any longer. Thus new beliefs and 'myths' must be created, or recreated.

## Style

His early poems indulge in hyperbole and exaggeration, but his later ones are characterised by a more controlled and less exuberant style. **Detailed descriptions of nature and animals, a variety of stress patterns and a particular use of symbols** are the main stylistic features of Hughes's poems.

### Key idea

#### The poet's task

According to Hughes, man has cultivated only his rational powers, neglecting his inner world of feelings, instinct and imagination, so separating himself from the universal energy. Therefore, the poet's task is to heal this rational / imaginative split by stirring

and restoring man's imagination, using all the senses to create vivid and emotive images. In his pursuit of these regenerative energies, Hughes appears to have adopted the role of the poet, the priest, the shaman.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 ANSWER** the following questions about Ted Hughes's life and works.

- 1 Which were Hughes's interests while at university?
- 2 What is the name of his last work of poetry?
- 3 Did Ted Hughes accept Larkin's simple, insular poetry?
- 4 What is the setting of most of his poems?
- 5 What is the difference between the Romantic view of nature and Hughes's?
- 6 What characters does he create? What do they symbolise?
- 7 What is the animal violence identified with?
- 8 What are the main characteristics of his style?
- 9 What is the role of the poet according to Hughes?

**Hawk Roosting<sup>1</sup>**

*The protagonist of this poem is a hawk.*

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.  
Inaction, no falsifying dream  
Between my hooked<sup>2</sup> head and hooked feet:  
Or in sleep rehearse<sup>3</sup> perfect kills<sup>4</sup> and eat.

- 5 The convenience of the high trees!  
The air's buoyancy<sup>5</sup> and the sun's ray  
Are of advantage to me;  
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

- 10 My feet are locked upon the rough bark<sup>6</sup>.  
It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot

- 15 Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry<sup>7</sup> in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads –

- 20 The allotment<sup>8</sup> of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

Ted Hughes  
*Lupercal*  
(1960)

- 1 Roosting. Appollaiato.
- 2 hooked. Uncinata.
- 3 rehearse. Provo, faccio le prove.
- 4 kills. Uccisioni.
- 5 buoyancy. Spinta aerostatica.
- 6 locked ... bark. Agganciati alla corteccia ruvida.
- 7 sophistry. Artificiosità.
- 8 allotment. Assegnazione.



## VISUAL ANALYSIS

**1 READ** the poem and identify its three parts. Then write a heading for each.

- Part 1 (lines .....): .....
- Part 2 (lines .....): .....
- Part 3 (lines .....): .....

**2 LOOK** at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.



How does the hawk describe himself?



What are the dominant semantic areas?



What is their function?

**3 DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

- 1 Who is the hawk speaking to?
- 2 Are the actions of the hawk conditioned by its conscience?
- 3 How is the creation of the hawk described? What relation is there between the bird and the rest of Creation?
- 4 How does the hawk contrast with man?
- 5 What does the bird symbolise?
- 6 What does it affirm in the last stanza?
- 7 How would you define the language of this poem?
- 8 The poem is a dramatic monologue. Which features of this form can you find?

## COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

**4 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph about the following topic: 'British poetry has been inhabited by a copious number of wild and tame animals since the days of the Romantic movement. Recall some of the poems belonging to this tradition specifying the features and symbolism of each animal.'