

# Ted Hughes

Poet Laureate  
1930 - 1998



*Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it.*

*Poetry in the Making (1967)*

## Key dates

### List important events in his life :

1930

Ted Hughes is consistently described as one of the twentieth century's greatest English poets. Born August 17th, 1930 in Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire, his family moved to Mexborough when he was seven to run a newspaper and tobacco shop. He wrote his first poems from the age of fifteen, some of which made their way into the school magazine. Before beginning English studies at Cambridge University, he spent much of his national service time reading and rereading all of Shakespeare. According to report, he could recite it all by heart. He switched from English to Archaeology and Anthropology in his third year.

1956

His first published poem appeared in 1954, the year he graduated from Cambridge. From 1955 to 1956, he worked as a rose gardener, night-watchman, zoo attendant, schoolteacher, and planned to teach in Spain then emigrate to Australia. 1956 saw the launch of the Cambridge students' poetry review, the *St Botolph's Review*, for which Hughes was one of six co-producers. It was also the day he met an American student, Sylvia Plath; they were married in four months.

1957

Hughes's first book of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was published in 1957 to immediate acclaim, winning the Harper publication contest.

1962

Hughes was married to the well-known American poet Sylvia Plath for seven years and they had two children. Plath committed suicide in 1963 shortly after their separation in 1962 and his departure for Devon. Many held Hughes responsible for her death as a consequence of his adulterous relationship with Assia Wevill.

1963

Though deeply marked by the loss, Hughes was publicly silent on the subject for more than 30 years out of his sense of responsibility to protect the couple's two young children, whose perceptions of their mother would have otherwise been impossibly spoiled by external interference. *Birthday Letters*, 88 letters-poems posthumously addressed to Plath, which he published only a few months before his own death, explore their complex and tumultuous relationship. *Last Letter*, a private poem about the three days leading to her death, was discovered in 2010, and is deemed Hughes's darkest poem.

1969

In 1967, he published *Poetry in the Making*, a book written after a series of talks he gave to the BBC and designed to encourage children to write poetry.

1970

On 25 March 1969, six years after Plath's suicide, Assia Wevill also committed suicide and killed her child, Alexandra Tatiana Elise (nicknamed Shura), the four-year-old daughter she had with Hughes. Their death left him in a state of shock and unable to write for months.

1984

In 1970, he married his second wife, a nurse called Carol Orchard, whom he lived with in Devon until his death. That year, he published his most magnificent -and darkest- work, *Crow*.

In 1984, he was appointed England's Poet Laureate.

From 1957 until his death in 1998 he wrote over 90 books and won numerous prizes and fellowships.

# Ted Hughes' style & themes

*This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own.*

*Poetry in the Making, 1967*

Hughes is what some have called a nature poet. A keen countryman and hunter from a young age, he viewed writing poems as a continuation of his earlier passion. Hughes' earlier poetic work is rooted in nature and, in particular, the innocent savagery of animals, an interest from an early age. He wrote frequently of the mixture of beauty and violence in the natural world.

Animals serve as a metaphor for his view on life: animals live out a struggle for the survival of the fittest in the same way that humans strive for success.

Immediate and visceral, Ted Hughes' poetry attempts to make sense of a human world forged by primitive and animal forces.



## Questions

Read the quote

1. What the pronoun «this» refer to, in your opinion?
2. Explain what Ted Hughes means by his "hunting" metaphor.

Read the text

3. Explain why Hughes is often considered as a "nature poet".
4. Explain the role played by animals in his poetry.

## Your mission

Your mission is to write collectively a book of poems entitled *Animals*.

Each student in the class is going to write a poem about a symbolic or metaphorical animal.

In order to do this, you will have to study one of Ted Hughes' best poems. You will also have to learn from his poem and follow his guidance to write your own.

# Poem analysis

## Questions

### Focus on the first 5 lines

1. Identify the writer.
2. Say where and when the scene takes place.
3. Describe the atmosphere.
4. Say what the writer is doing.

### Read the 2nd stanza

5. What is happening?
6. What could that «something» be?

### Read the 3rd, 4th and 5th stanzas

7. What is the «something»?
8. Punctuate the stanzas with three full stops (.) that you will place as logically as you can.
9. Highlight verb and nouns groups. Using them, write a sentence in prose that says what it is doing.
10. Establish the link between «shadow» and «body».
11. What effect does the repetition of «now» create?

### Read the 5th and 6th stanzas.

12. In your opinion, does «Across clearings» belong to the 4th or the 5th stanza, or both?
13. Read l.17 again. What effect does punctuation create?
14. What do l.18-19 refer to?

### Read the last stanza

15. Comment on the effect «Till,» (l.21) creates.
16. How does the presence materialize?
17. Read l.22 : is the animal real, a metaphor or both?
18. Read the last two lines and compare the situation with that in the first stanza.
19. Develop your answer to question 17.

### Further analysis.

20. Read "How to write poetry" on the next page and answer the questions.
21. Does this advice apply to this poem? Study words, rhythms, sounds, images and punctuation.

## Tool box

a twig : a small branch  
warily : cautiously, carefully  
lame : unable to walk normally because of an injury  
to lag : to move slowly, to stop (here)  
a stump : the bottom part of a tree  
a hollow : a hole in the ground  
bold : brave, unafraid and confident  
a clearing : an open space in a forest  
a stink : a strong unpleasant smell

## The Thought-Fox

I imagine this midnight moment's forest: 1  
Something else is alive  
Beside the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.  
Through the window I see no star: 5  
Something more near  
Though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness:  
Cold, delicately as the dark snow, 9  
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
And again now, and now, and now  
Sets neat prints into the snow 13  
Between trees, and warily a lame  
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
Of a body that is bold to come  
Across clearings, an eye, 17  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business  
Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox 21  
It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957

## How to write poetry

This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature. (...) I have simplified everything a great deal, but on the whole that is the story. Some of it may seem a bit obscure to you. How can a poem, for instance, be like an animal? Well, perhaps it cannot look much of a giraffe or an emu or an octopus, or anything you might find in a menagerie. It is better to call it an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms. (...)

So, as a poet, you have to make sure that all those parts over which you have control, the words, the rhythms and images, are alive. That is where the difficulties begin. Yet the rules, to begin with, are very simple. Words that live are those which we hear, like "click" or "chuckle", or which we see, like "freckled" or "veined", or which we taste, like "vinegar" or "sugar", or touch, like "prickle" or "oily", or smell, like "tar" or "onion". Words which belong directly to one of the five senses. Or words which act and seem to use their muscles, like "flick" or "balance". (...)

Luckily, you do not have to bother about it so long as you do one thing. That one thing is, imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic. If you do this you do not have to worry about commas or full-stops or that sort of thing. (...) You keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words.

You will read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a spirit, a creature.

extracted from *Poetry in the Making*, Ted Hughes, 1967



### Questions

1. Explain how a poem can be an animal.
2. How can a poet bring a poem, his animal, to life?
3. Make a list of tips Hughes gives us to write poetry.

### Training

You are now going to write a poem about a pet. It can be your pet if you have one.

Preliminary work.

1. Think of the animal's physical qualities, its character, the way it moves etc before writing. Think of a context (is your cat sleeping on the sofa or chasing insects in the garden?).
2. Follow Ted Hughes's tips to write your poem. Create a list of words you are going to use to write your poem. Look up unknown vocabulary in a [French-English](#), an [English dictionary](#) and a [dictionary of synonyms](#). Choose your words carefully.
3. When you are ready, you can start writing your poem. Try to include figures of speech and enjambments. Try to create a rhythm and work on the prosody too.

## Your mission

Are you ready to take up the challenge set by Ted Hughes?

*"Animals" are the subject here, but more important is the idea of a concentrated improvisation on a set theme. The exercise should be given a set length, say one side of a page, and a set time limit.*

*The result should be a free poem where grammar, sentence structure etc, are all sacrificed in an attempt to break fresh and accurate perceptions and words out of the reality of the subject chosen.*

**Subject** : write a poem about a symbolic or metaphorical animal. Remember that the poem itself can be the animal.

**Set length** : one side of a page.

**Set time** : two hours.

**Help** : Think about your animal before writing and look up words to describe it and your perception of it. Use a [French-English](#), an [English dictionary](#) and a [dictionary of synonyms](#) to create a list of vocabulary associated with your animal.

Don't forget to try to use some of the poetry-writing techniques seen in the analysis of *The Thought-Fox*.