

# Ted Hughes: the Development of a Children's Poet

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## ***Abstract***

This article looks at how Ted Hughes' poetry for children developed over more than thirty years of publication. It traces the movement from his earlier, more conventional rhyming poems, such as *Meet My Folks!* (1961) and *Nessie the Mannerless Monster* (1964), to the mature, free verse "animal poems" for older readers of *Season Songs* (1975), *Under the North Star* (1981) and the "farmyard fable" *What is the Truth?* (1984). The article argues that the later lyrical poems for younger readers where Hughes returned to rhyme, *The Cat and the Cuckoo* (1987) and *The Mermaid's Purse* (1993), represent an undervalued final phase of Hughes' work for children which is rarely discussed by critics. The discussion considers Hughes' changing attitude to the concept of the "children's poet" at different periods of his career. Reference is made throughout to Hughes' own writing about children and poetry, such as *Poetry in the Making* (1967), and to parallel developments in his poetry for adults.

## ***Key Words***

Poetry; Children's Poetry; Animal Poems; Rhyming Poems; Free Verse.

## ***Introduction***

Later in his career, Ted Hughes came to a clear understanding of what writing poetry for children should and should not be. Writing draft notes for a radio programme which Lissa Paul dates to a "late stage in his career," Hughes observed wisely that: "Writing poetry for children is a curious occupation... . And the most curious thing about it is that we think children need a special kind of poetry" (quoted in Paul, 2005, pp. 257-58). Hughes also became more articulate about the kind of poetry for children he personally wanted to write. He described it in 1984 as: "a style of communication for which children are the specific audience, but which adults can overhear ... and listen, in a way secretly – as children" (p. 258). Later still, in the last few years of his life, Hughes was confident enough to be able to describe in detail his method of writing poems for children:

Writing for children, I depend on my feeling of what it was like to be the age of my imagined reader...I find a common wavelength - of subject matter, style, attitude, tone - between the self I was then and the self I am now. Then I write what amuses and interests and satisfies both. So it has to obey those criteria set by my imagined younger self. And it has to meet the quality controls that I apply to my other verse. (quoted in Neill, 1995)

Hughes also acknowledged at this time that it was difficult to make hard and fast distinctions between adult and child readers, and the dangers of fobbing children off with a kind of "poetry substitute" rather than the real thing:

So - what is a poem for a young reader? If they can recognise and be excited by some vital piece of experience within a poem, very young children can swallow the most sophisticated verbal technique. They will accept plastic toys, if that's all they're given, but their true driving passion is to get possession of the codes of adult reality - of the real world. (quoted in Neill, 1995)

However, these were insights Hughes arrived at through publishing poems for children for over 30 years. They were not as apparent to him when he first set out to write for a young audience early in his career as a poet. At this stage, as he described in a letter to his brother Gerald dated 27th August 1957, he saw writing for children as something he could do literally before breakfast, before he began what he called his "more strenuous lofty" work for adults (Reid, 2007, p. 108). In the late 1950s, Hughes and his wife Sylvia Plath had both taken the decision to leave teaching in its different forms to become professional writers. They had also taken the decision to become parents. Writing for children may have presented itself to both as, potentially, an appropriate way of augmenting their income at this time.

### ***The Early Children's Poetry***

Ted Hughes' first book of poetry for children, *Meet My Folks!*, was published in 1961, between the birth of his first child Frieda in 1960 and that of Nicholas in 1962. In a later comment he suggests the likely audience: "In my first book of children's verse, *Meet My Folks*, I imagined myself about seven..." (quoted in Neill, 1995). By this time he had already published his adult collections *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960), establishing immediately his distinctive voice and his uncompromising take on the natural world. The contrast between this adult work and children's poems is startling, as the very first poem in *Meet My Folks!*, "My Sister Jane", demonstrates:

And I say nothing – no, not a word  
About our Jane. Haven't you heard?  
She's a bird, a bird, a bird, a bird.  
Oh it never would do to let folks know  
My sister's nothing but a great big crow. (Hughes, 1961, p. 12)

The poems in *Meet My Folks!* use full, regular rhymes, poetic diction, repetition and a whimsical tone. Animals and plants feature, including the first appearance of Hughes' crow, but used as a means of describing people not as subjects in themselves. Hughes is not contrasting human and animal worlds and finding the human world lacking, as in his adult work of this time. The voice Hughes uses at the start of his career is not his own but that of the "special kind of poetry" usually written for children. It implies a child reader who responds mostly to fancy, humour, full rhymes and strong rhythms, rather than the child who "can recognise and be excited by some vital piece of experience within a poem" (quoted in Neill, 1995). There is a clear contrast in "quality control" with his adult poetry, which uses free verse and presents an unsentimental view of nature. As Keith Sagar has observed of *Meet My Folks!*: "The poems are fresh and engaging, but shapeless... the poet's shaping imagination is not fully engaged" (Sagar, 1972, p. 15).

Interestingly, Hughes seems to assume more of the child as a writer than as a reader in his early work. In the highly influential schools radio broadcasts he made in 1961-2, later collected as *Poetry in the Making* (1967), he included his adult animal poems such as "The Thought-Fox", "Pike" and "Wind". He also famously described the premise he worked from in getting children to write poems: "I assume that the latent talent for self-expression in any child is immeasurable" (Hughes, 1967, p. 12). This

assumption about the lack of limits on children's imaginative powers seems to be absent in Hughes' own very earliest poems for children.

In 1963, Hughes published his second volume for children, *The Earth -Owl and Other Moon People*, of which he later said, "I imagined a slightly older self... . This one was about 13" (quoted in Neill, 1995). The tone of the volume is set in the title poem, "The Earth-Owl":

Far undergrounded,  
Moon-miners dumbfounded  
Hear the speed-whistle  
Of this living missile... (Hughes, 1963, p. 7)

There are more fantasy animals and plants featured here, along with a fanciful tone, which becomes almost nonsense poetry at times, not found in Hughes' adult work of the period. The rhymes are more exaggerated than in the first children's collection, often clumsy and contrived (as in "Moon Hops"). Again Sagar sums up the poetry well: "Though he tries very hard to be grotesque and clever, Hughes cannot breathe life into his moon creatures. The rhythmic ineptitude ... makes part of it sound like McGonagall .... They are slapdash – mere poetic doodles" (1972, pp. 15-16). The comparison to the doggerel of the famously bad Scottish poet William McGonagall (1830-1902) is not flattering.

The first and last Moon poems included in Hughes' posthumous *Collected Poems for Children (CPC)* (2005), "Moon Whales" and "Earth-Moon", stand out as different from the poems in between. These use free verse and are far more powerful and imaginative, and nearer to Hughes' adult poems. For example, "Moon Whales" begins:

They plough through the moon stuff  
Just under the surface  
Lifting the moon's skin  
Like a muscle... (Hughes, 2005, p. 69)

In fact, these two Moon poems were published 13 years later, in 1976, at the same time as children's collections from Hughes' middle period such as *Season Songs*. Their presence alongside the original poems from *The Earth -Owl and Other Moon People* in *CPC* points up the contrast between Hughes' earlier and later work. Hughes actually continued to write and publish his Moon poems in the later collections *Earth-Moon* (1976), *Moon-Whales* (1976), and *Moon-Bells* (1978). They provide an interesting insight into Hughes' development as a children's poet, as he continues to engage with the same imaginative world for a young audience in very different ways.

*Nessie the Mannerless Monster* (1964), Hughes' third poetry book for children, commissioned rather oddly by *Vogue* magazine, is a longer narrative poem. Rhyme is used again, though often more inventively, including frequent use of part-rhymes. However, the overall effect is again reminiscent of McGonagall, whether deliberately so or not:

The mayor of Edinburgh nearly had a fit  
When he saw Nessie. "Look at it! Look at it!"  
He cried, and fainted right there on the spot.  
But the police said, "Whose is that huge cat?  
It is blocking our traffic more than a bit.  
Divert it South to London." So that was that. (Hughes, 1964, unnumbered)

Keith Cushman argues that the resemblance to McGonagall is intended: “Hughes reasons that McGonagall’s unforced but strongly rhyming awkwardness, which sounds inept to an adult, would be delightful to a young listener” (1983, p. 242). The poems certainly sound inept to the adult reader. In his own reading aloud of them for the radio broadcasts which were published as *Poetry in the Making*, however, Hughes does manage to make them sound less so. The contrast with the adult poetry of this time, though, such as the collection *Wodwo* (1967), and even the children’s story *The Iron Man* (1968), remains stark.

### ***The Poetry of the Middle Years***

The first of Hughes’ mature collections for children, *Season Songs* (1975), actually has its roots in five rather sombre “Autumn Songs written for children’s voices” published in 1968, while he was still writing the bleakest of his adult collections, *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970). This was a dark period for Hughes, bringing up his children himself following Sylvia Plath’s suicide in 1963. In 1969 his own mother died and the woman for whom he had left Sylvia, Assia Wevill, also killed herself and their daughter.

However, the other poems in *Season Songs* reflect a more settled period in Hughes’ life, beginning with his second marriage in 1970 to Carol Orchard, to whom the book is dedicated, and his purchase of Moortown Farm in Devon two years later. This was also a time of renewed interest in children and their education, featuring the first publication of his essay “Myth and Education”. This was first given as a paper at one of the pioneering conferences on children’s literature run by St Luke’s College (Exeter, in Devon, England), which resulted in the founding of *Children’s Literature in Education*. The essay actually appeared in Issue 1 of this journal in March 1970. In 1976, Hughes also became President of the Farms for City Children charity, run by the children’s author Michael Morpurgo, which enables children from inner cities to spend a week working on a farm in rural Devon, close to Hughes’ own home.

Illustrated by Leonard Baskin, who had previously collaborated on adult collections, *Season Songs* “began as children’s poems, but they grew up” according to Hughes (1976, dust jacket). The poems were “not for children only, that is - but staying within the easy hearing of children . . .” (quoted in Neill, 1995). In *Season Songs* Hughes uses his own voice not a “special” one for children; the writing is much closer to his earlier adult animal poetry and to the other poetry of this period, such as *Moortown* (1979), though now it is domesticated farm animals he is observing more often than wild ones. Free verse is used in most of the poems to give shape to a powerful imaginative writing about the natural world, frequently contrasting the dignity of animal life with the foolishness of human behaviour, as in “Work and Play”:

The swallow of summer, she toils all summer,  
A blue-dark knot of glittering voltage,  
A whiplash swimmer, a fish of the air.

But the serpent of cars that crawls through the dust  
In shimmering exhaust  
Searching to slake  
Its fever in ocean  
Will play and be idle or else it will bust. (Hughes, 1976, p. 36)

Little allowance is made for a young audience in the dazzling interplay of sounds, images and allusions, the unsentimental but affectionate observations of farm animals:

Right from the start he is dressed in his best – his blacks and his whites.  
Little Fauntleroy – quiffed and glossy,  
A Sunday suit, a wedding natty get-up,  
Standing in dunged straw... (“A March Calf”, Hughes, 1976, p. 13)

As earlier critics have suggested, *Season Songs* is a turning point not just in Hughes’ writing for children, but in his career as a poet overall. For example, Sagar sees the poems as Hughes’ Songs of Innocence, following the Songs of Experience of the *Crow* poems (1978, p. 159). Cushman also suggests the importance of the collection in Hughes’ development after *Crow*: “The childhood vision was liberating and led the poet to a renewed vision of life’s sacredness and harmony” (1983, p. 247).

*Under the North Star* (1981) sees Hughes’ sensibility engaging with very different flora and fauna from the Devon farming landscape of *Season Songs*. Here he evokes the animals, birds and terrain of the Arctic Circle, possibly inspired by a fishing trip to Alaska with his son in 1980. The immediate inspiration, though, was apparently Leonard Baskin’s daughter: the poems “originated as an entertainment for a lively and precocious little girl,” as Hughes put it (1981, dust jacket). The original manuscript of *Under the North Star*, among the Baskin papers in the British Library, is a stunning example of collaboration between the imaginations of poet and artist.

*Under the North Star* also has a humour not found in Hughes’ children’s poetry since his early work in its observations of wildlife, as in “Moose”:

The goofy Moose, the walking house-frame,  
Is lost  
In the forest. He bumps, he blunders, he stands.

With massy bony thoughts sticking out near his ears –  
Reaching out palm upwards, to catch whatever might be falling from heaven –  
He tries to think... (Hughes, 1981, p. 36)

Free verse is used again, but there is a partial return to rhyme here: about half the poems use rhyming, sometimes for comic effect, as in “Skunk.” The poems have the powerful imagery and vitality of Hughes’ adult poetry; in fact there are similarities between poems here and animal poems from earlier collections, for example “Eagle” sounds like “Hawk Roosting” from *Lupercal* in its language, and “The Mosquito” is rather like the *Crow* poems in tone. This violent energy has divided critics. Anthony Wilson complains about “the bloodlust autopilot laziness of so much of *Under the North Star*” (2001, p. 84), whereas for Cushman: “As in *Season Songs*, the poems have a simplicity that has been hard-earned ... he has refined his technique down to a direct, unforced, but still powerfully poetic method” (1983, p. 253).

*What is the Truth?* (1984), “A Farmyard Fable for the Young”, was written at the suggestion of Michael and Clare Morpurgo. Hughes later commented:

I obeyed only one criterion - my feeling for keeping in touch with ten year olds genuinely interested in what I was writing about, the creatures they were meeting for perhaps the first time

ever. I tried to transmit my own affection for these creatures and some first-hand knowledge - as if we had them right there in front of us . . . (quoted in Neill, 1995).

The scenario is a bit like Dylan Thomas's "play for voices" *Under Milk Wood*, which Hughes would have been familiar with. At 2 am, God and his son ask the inhabitants of a village, still asleep, to describe an animal they know well. The villagers' souls sing about their chosen animals in poetry and language that reflects their own character. They contradict each other and sometimes themselves in their views of different aspects of the animals.

The sequence contains some of Hughes' most memorable poems, for children or adults, reminiscent at times of the close observation and imaginative reach of D.H. Lawrence's collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, which Hughes also knew well. The poetry has the humour of *Under the North Star* but more of the gentle affection for the natural world of *Season Songs*. The observation is forensic in its precision but there is warmth as well in the personification:

The Fly  
Is the Sanitary Inspector. He detects every speck  
With his Geiger counter.  
Detects it, then inspects it  
Through his multiple spectacles. You see him everywhere  
Bent over his microscope. (Hughes, 1984, p. 70)

*What is the Truth?* continues some of the formal developments in Hughes' children's poetry found in *Under the North Star*. For example, there is some strongly alliterative language and a partial return to rhyming, since some of the characters use rhyme, others free verse, according to their personalities. But what is most striking about all three collections of Hughes' middle years as a children's poet is the full imaginative engagement with his material, as well as the stylistic integrity of the poetry. Here truly "the adult and children's poems have drawn closer and closer together. The themes and visionary intention are absolutely the same ... Even the style is less dissimilar" (Cushman, 1983, p. 254). Fittingly, in the year *What is the Truth?* was published Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate, the first poet with a substantial body of work for children to hold that office. This appointment may have prompted Hughes a few years later, in a conversation with Morpurgo, his friend and neighbour, to suggest the establishment of the post of Children's Laureate, which Morpurgo himself went on to hold from 2003-5.

### ***The Poetry of the Later Years***

Hughes' final two books of children's poems, *The Cat and the Cuckoo* (1987) and *The Mermaid's Purse* (1993), are not considered at all in some surveys of his work (e.g. Wilson, 2001) or are seen only as lightweight, light-hearted pieces. I would argue that in the two little books written for very young children that concluded Hughes' career as a children's poet he continued to develop his craft in significant ways. Hughes himself said of the two collections: "Writing those verses taught me a great deal..." (quoted in Neill, 1995). His plan, he said, was "to compress each subject into a very brief but intensely musical form that would be above all easy to memorise" (quoted in Neill 1995), or as he described it elsewhere: "my wish was to capitalise on a character study of the creature... My model was runic knots ... mnemonic *quipus*" (quoted in Skea, 2008).

The poems in *The Cat and the Cuckoo* certainly have the memorable quality of both a well-turned lyric and a witty epigram. But Hughes' imaginative vision of the natural world, as a source of contact with energies we have lost as humans, is still present, as in "Cat":

You need your Cat.  
When you slump down  
All tired and flat  
With too much town... (Hughes, 1987, unnumbered)

Hughes develops the form he used in the Farmer's Wife's song about her dog in *What is the Truth?*, a poem which is included again in *The Cat and the Cuckoo*:

Asleep he wheezes at his ease.  
He only wakes to scratch his fleas.

He hogs the fire, he bakes his head  
As if it were a loaf of bread... ("Dog", Hughes, 1987, unnumbered)

In this collection, dedicated to the young visitors who came to the Farms for City Children scheme, Hughes returns to rhyme for all the poems, for the first time since *Meet My Folks!*. These short poems, often written in the person of the creature described, make full use of word and sound play, especially alliteration. Hughes is not writing down to the 4-5 year olds he envisages as the audience for these poems: there is a different conception of the child reader from his early rhyming poetry. Now he is able to use his own voice, not the conventional one of the children's poet, and shape his imaginative vision in rhyme for a young audience. He is able to distil the essence of his animal poetry into very simple lyric forms, refined down into an even greater simplicity than in the middle period poetry under the discipline of writing for the very young

*The Mermaid's Purse* was Hughes' last book of poetry for children, though placed first in his *Collected Poems for Children* because judged to have the youngest audience. Again, these are short, sharp poems often in the first person, but this time Hughes turns his imaginative gaze on a part of the natural world he has not focused on in a sequence before: the creatures of the sea. Although short and rhyming, the poems still make few concessions to their very young audience in terms of vocabulary and metaphorical sweep: the language is like that of Gerard Manley Hopkins in places with its use of alliteration, assonance and part-rhyme. However, there is the humour once again which resurfaced in *Under the North Star* in these observations of marine life, and also the "affection" which Hughes felt should always be present in poetry for children (quoted in Neill, 1995):

Gulls are glanced from the lift  
Of cliffing air  
And left  
Loitering in the descending drift... ("Gulls", Hughes, 1993, unnumbered)

## ***Conclusions***

Hughes' children's poems of his middle and later periods confirm W.H. Auden's well-known claim that "there are no good poems which are only for children" (1963, p. 18). Hughes himself seemed to

have eventually arrived at a similar position of believing, as Morpurgo puts it, that “good writing was good writing, no matter whether it was for children or for adults” (quoted in Cripps, 2005). As Cushman has argued, Hughes’ children’s poetry needs to be recognised as “an integral component of his artistic achievement.” Cushman also rightly argued that writing poetry for children was important for Hughes and had a beneficial effect on his overall development as a poet: “it is clear that Hughes has a basic and abiding need to write children’s poetry. The act of addressing an audience that contains children is both relaxing and liberating to his imagination” (1983, p. 256).

Beginning in the 1960s with some rather conventional children’s poems, Hughes went on over the next 30 years to renew “the language we use to define ‘poetry for children’” in his most successful work (Wilson, 2001, p. 89). His development continued with each collection he brought out after his early work. Although his mature achievements in poetry for children are certainly in the three thematic collections of his middle years, full of so many unforgettable poems, Hughes did not rest on the critical recognition he received for these, for example winning the Signal Poetry Award in 1985 for *What is the Truth?*. He continued to hone his technique and to find ways of expressing his vision of the renewing power of the natural world in the poetry he published for his youngest ever audience in the final period of his career, before his death in 1998. As Morpurgo has observed, Hughes in the end wrote his way to an understanding of “how wonderful literature for children can be,” arriving finally at the realisation that: “You don’t have to write down to them. You can make it as deep, rich and powerful as any literature for adults” (quoted in Cripps, 2005).

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