

Context: Ted Hughes and 'Bayonet Charge'

Ted Hughes (1930–1998)

Ted Hughes was born near Halifax, West Yorkshire in 1930. His father was a carpenter and a veteran of World War I. Although his family moved when he was eight years old, the landscape of his birthplace had a huge impact on his writing. He went to Cambridge in the 1950s where he read English Literature, Archaeology and Anthropology. While at Cambridge, he met his first wife, Sylvia Plath, whom he married in 1956.

After university he had various jobs, including working in a zoo, teaching and reading scripts at Pinewood Studios. Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes had two children but later separated. In the year after their separation she committed suicide. Hughes followed his relationship with Plath by one with Assia Wevill. They lived together and she looked after his children from his first marriage. However, she also committed suicide, gassing herself and her daughter in a manner similar to that of Plath.

In 1970, Hughes married Carol Orchard and they remained together until his death. In 1984 Hughes became Poet Laureate and held the post until his death. He died in 1998, shortly after the publication of *Birthday Letters*, a collection of poems about his relationship with Sylvia Plath. His ashes were scattered on Dartmoor.

Hughes writes about the elements and aspects of the natural world in much of his poetry. The poet Simon Armitage said that for Hughes, poetry was 'a connecting rod between nature and humanity'. Hughes was a very prolific writer who as well as writing poetry, also wrote for children. In his book *Poetry in the Making*, he gives insight into the writing process and his inspiration for writing:

It is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find the words that will unlock the doors of all those many mansions in the head and express something – perhaps not much, just something – of the crush of information that presses in on us from the way a crow flies over and the way a man walks and the look of a street and from what we did one day a dozen years ago. Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are.

'Bayonet Charge'

This poem seems to be heavily influenced by the fact that Hughes' father was a veteran of the First World War (having survived his regiment's massacre at Gallipoli), as well as by the poetry of Wilfred Owen.

Ted Hughes served in the RAF, but he did not see combat. He spent much of his time in the services reading.

Bibliography

Pilgrim, McNab, Osman. *Working with the English Anthology*, Heinemann, 1998

Hughes, Ted. *Poetry in the Making*, Faber & Faber, 1967

The following clip is a tribute to Ted Hughes with some readings of his work:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18DdJO9Lg-s>

<http://uk.encarta.msn.com> (link no longer active)

<http://en.wikipedia.org>

www.channel4learning.com