

# *Ted Hughes: the development of a children's poet*

Article

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## **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)