Teachers’ Notes

Curriculum subject: English Literature
Key Stage: 4 and 5

Author / Text: Ted Hughes: Birthday Letters
Theme: Birthday Letters: Examining the writing process

Rationale

In these activities, students will consider Ted Hughes as a poet and a person, as well as some of the literary and personal influences on his writing. They will explore some of his poems in draft and published form, exploring the differences between the versions and the possible reasons for these differences.

Content

Literary and historical sources from the site:

- *Saint Botolph's Review*, with annotations in Ted Hughes's and Lucas Myers' hand (1956)
- Manuscript drafts of 'Fulbright Scholars' and other poems from the Birthday Letters notebooks (undated)
- Manuscript drafts of 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress' by Ted Hughes (undated)
- Notebooks of Ted Hughes (c. 1959–64)

Recommended reading (short articles):

- An introduction to Birthday Letters by Neil Roberts

External links:

- Photograph of Ted Hughes at the Faber cocktail party, 23 June 1960
- *New Statesman* article about ‘Last Letter’, a poem written by Ted Hughes on the night Sylvia Plath died.

Key questions

- As a poet, how did Ted Hughes approach writing Birthday Letters?
• What is revealed about Ted Hughes as a poet and as man through his drafts and notebooks?
• How is real life experience transformed in Hughes’s poems?

Activities

1) Look at the edition of *Saint Botolph’s Review* which includes the first poems Hughes ever published under his own name. Read the poem, ‘St Botolph’s’, bearing in mind the fact that it was at the launch party for this magazine that Hughes and Plath met for the first time. What do you learn from the published poem about Hughes’s and Plath’s first meeting?

2) Compare the published poem with the manuscript draft. Why do you think Hughes might have made the changes that he did, especially the omissions?

3) Look at the image of the Faber cocktail party and read the diary entry for 23 June in which Hughes describes meeting W H Auden, commenting on his ‘reptile wrinkles’. In this notebook, Hughes comments that ‘intimate friendship is cruel observation’. What other evidence of this ‘cruel observation’ can you find in this notebook or in his poetry?

4) Hughes believed strongly that poetry should not simply be autobiographical but also that experiences should be ‘imaginatively transformed’. Read the poem ‘Flounders’ and then consider how the experience described in his notebooks has been transformed into poetry.

5) Read the manuscript drafts of ‘A Pink Wool Knitted Dress’ and then read the published version. Consider the key differences between the versions, and discuss what difference those changes make to the overall meaning of the poem. Which version do you prefer? Why?

Extension activities

• Use the draft of ‘Skylarks’ found in the article by Neil Roberts as a starting point for writing a poem about a bird. This is a useful means of showing how fundamental the editing process is.
• Read the *New Statesman* article about ‘Last Letter’, a poem written by Ted Hughes on the night Sylvia Plath died. Listen to the actor Jonathan Pryce read a section from the poem. ‘Last Letter’ was not included in the collection *Birthday Letters*. Consider why Hughes chose not to include it, and what it reveals about Hughes as a poet and as a man.