

SOME WETTER, WITTIER OTTER COULD UTTER

Speech sounds and involving rhyme in Ted Hughes's poems for children

By Steven Withrow

First, forget everything you know about Ted Hughes.

It's all fascinating stuff, I'm sure, especially the bits about Sylvia Plath, British Poet Laureate, and the mythical Crow. But we won't need any of it to think about what we're here to think about—namely, how Ted Hughes worked with *speech sounds* in his poems for children.

Without becoming mired in linguistics, phonetics, and music theory, I merely wish to note some points of interest in three poems by Hughes that might help you hear more, listen better, and enunciate more effectively the next time you read a poem. Paying close attention to different aspects of sound can pay enormous dividends for poets, too.

I will also make a case for a literary concept I call *involving rhyme*.

There's plenty of impenetrable academic writing about the role of sound in poetry, and critics and poets have theorized for centuries about articulation and intonation, but the poet's *craft* of composing and arranging the sounds of speech has not been, and will likely never be, adequately addressed.

What happens often when we begin to talk about sound in a poem is we turn too quickly to matters of imagery, metaphor, diction, tone, syntax, and subject matter—emphasizing meaning over music, in other words.

To think of sound only as a means to create meaning is to deny a poem its body, its physical, voiced presence. Children's poems, in their brevity and their penchant for performance, can help us identify and play with certain first principles of sound: the basic ways that syllables and sound clusters interact musically, separate from what they signify when grouped into words and phrases and lines.

Ragworm

Ragworm once
Was all the rage.
But suddenly, see
This foolish age
Of fish is in.
Fashion of flounce,
Of scale and slime,
Of scoot and squirm
And gill and fin
Gorping like fools.

Let future time
Be soon unfurled.

Bring all such schools
To end of term.

Return the world
to me, the Worm.

Let's first look briefly at this poem's rhythm and meter, which is loose iambic dimeter (two iambs per line with a few variations). Note that the poem starts on a single strong stress ("Rag-"), which strikes with greater force than would an unstressed syllable ("A rag-" or "The rag-"). Two lines ("Fashion of flounce" and "Gorping like fools") begin with a trochee, or inverted iamb, for rhythmic emphasis.

The third line in the first stanza has an extra beat, seemingly making "-denly, see" an anapest. However, the pause at the comma (aided by the rhyme on "ly" and "see") slows the rhythm there, whereas a typical anapest is quicker and unbroken. The last line also has a strong pause, or caesura, at the comma.

Ragworm

Ragworm once	A
Was all the rage.	B

But suddenly, see	C (2x)
This <u>foolish</u> age	B
Of fish is in.	D
Fashion of flounce,	A
Of scale and slime,	E
Of <u>scoot</u> and squirm	F
And gill and fin	D
Gorping like <u>fools</u> .	G
Let <u>future</u> time	E
Be <u>soon</u> unfurled.	H
Bring all such <u>schools</u>	G
To <u>end</u> of term.	F
Return the world	H
To <u>me</u> , the Worm.	F

This poem is in four stanzas—one of ten lines and three couplets—and the rhyme scheme is irregular. Taken together, it is ABCBDAEFDG EH GF HF, with a slant rhyme on *once* and *flounce*. However, that only tracks the end rhymes. If we include the threads of internal rhymes (perfect and slant), we begin to see that this poem is actually a tight weave of sound with a powerful ending anticipated in the very first line. It is no great stretch to say that nearly every syllable in the poem is sonically linked to a number of other syllables through alliteration, consonance, assonance, and straight repetition. I’ve underlined all the “oo” sounds as just one pattern of linkage.

What keeps this intensely unified poem from becoming a mouthy mash of chiming syllables is the care that Hughes takes in modulating and balancing his lines, often allowing his long vowels to fall on strong stresses interspersed by softer-stressed short vowels. He also limits the use of certain consonant and vowel sounds, giving the short “o” and “p” in “Gorping” added sonic significance. Much more could be said about this poem, particularly about the resonant ending sounds of its words, but let’s move on to our second example.

Otter

An Otter am I,
High and dry
Over the pebbles
See me hobble.
My water-bag wobbles
Until I spill
At the river sill
And flow away thin
As an empty skin
That dribbles bubbles.

Then I jut up my mutt,
All spikey with wet.
My moustaches bristle
As I mutter, or whistle:
“Now what’s the matter?”

(For that is my song.
Not very long.
There might be a better
Some wetter, wittier
Otter could utter.)

Like “Ragworm,” this poem has an irregular stanza pattern and rhyme scheme. Here, the underlying iambic dimeter is complicated by variations and substitutions in almost every line, including feminine rhymes that soften the line endings. The regular and internally rhyming “Until I spill” serves, to my ear, as a kind of grounding line for the entire poem.

In contrast to “Ragworm,” the closely packed slant rhymes make “Otter” much more of a tongue-twister. Controlling the cascade of rhymed syllables is the contrast between the one-syllable and two-syllable rhyme pairs and groupings across the three stanzas. Also, a preponderance of short vowels pushes forward the less frequent long vowels. This effect is felt most strongly in “spikey,” the only word in the poem with two long vowels, as well as hard “p” and “k” sounds.

The Moon-Mare

The moon-mare runs
On human mountains.

Wild as a ghost
She is here, she is past,

In her lunatic fury.
The only sure lure is

The music stolen
From stars that have fallen.

Play this to the twilight
In a silence. She may hear it.

She moves like nightfall.
Beautiful, beautiful.

Her horizons lose her.
And your hair freezes,

And in the chill dew
She is watching you.

When the music ends
There she stands.

What is she like?
You dare not look.

You sit in her stare.
Your dare not stir.

This poem tempts me to write about intonation patterns, fluctuations in pitch, and

rising and falling cadences. Such complex figures are clearly part of this poem's sonic architecture. However, I become instantly befuddled when trying to blend musical and literary terminology in a cohesive manner, so for the purposes of this essay I will return to my discussion of linked sounds.

Slant-rhymed couplets—including the intriguingly ambiguous seventh stanza—are the most obvious structural elements in “The Moon-Mare.” If we apply to this poem the same principles of unity and modulated variation we discovered in “Ragworm” and “Otter” then we can easily find here a webwork of sonic connections and contrasts within and across the eleven stanzas.

I call the sum total of such correspondences and interrelations a poem's *involving rhyme*. “Involve” means to roll or turn inward, and involving rhyme winds, coils, spirals, and wreathes about a poem's fabric from first utterance to last.

In Ted Hughes's masterful poems for children, our ears can hear subtle echoes and our voices can register minute changes that involve us, body and soul, in a syllable symphony...

The music stolen
From stars that have fallen.

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