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The Poetry of Robinson Jeffers



Table of Contents

The Poetry of Robinson Jeffers

About the Book.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Historical and Literary Context.....	7
Other Works/Adaptations.....	8
Discussion Questions.....	9
Additional Resources.....	10
Credits.....	11

“Permanent things,
or things forever
renewed, like the
grass and human
passions, are the
material for
poetry...”

Preface

The poetry of Robinson Jeffers is emotionally direct, magnificently musical, and philosophically profound. No one has ever written more powerfully about the natural beauty of the American West. Determined to write a truthful poetry purged of ephemeral things, Jeffers cultivated a style at once lyrical, tough-minded, and timeless.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to Robinson Jeffers

The poetry of Robinson Jeffers is distractingly memorable, not only for its strong music, but also for the hard edge of its wisdom. His verse, especially the wild, expansive narratives that made him famous in the 1920s, does not fit into the conventional definitions of modern American poetry. Scarcely stirring from Carmel, California, Jeffers wrote about ideas: big, naked, howling ideas that no reader can miss. The directness and clarity of Jeffers's style reflects the priority he put on communicating his worldview.

He challenged scientists on their own territory. Unlike most writers, he had studied science seriously in college and graduate school. He accepted the destruction of anthropocentric values explicit in current biology, geology, and physics. Jeffers concentrated on articulating the moral, philosophical, and imaginative implications of those discoveries. He struggled to answer the questions that science had been able only to ask: What are man's responsibilities in a world not made solely for him? How does humankind lead a good and meaningful life without a Providential God?

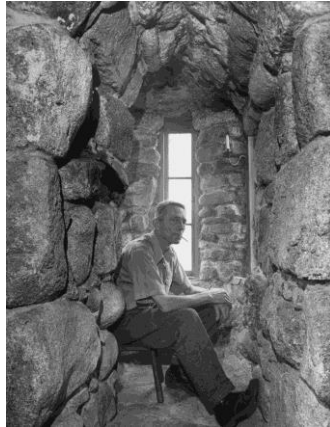
Standing apart from the world, he passed dispassionate judgment on his race and civilization, and he found them wanting. Pointing out some grievous contradictions at the core of Western industrial society earned Jeffers a reputation as a bitter misanthrope (he sometimes was) but this verdict hardly invalidates the essential accuracy of his message. He saw the pollution of the environment, the destruction of other species, the squandering of natural resources, the recurrent urge to war, and the violent squalor of cities as the inevitable result of a species out of harmony with its own world.

What saves Jeffers's poetry from unrelieved bitterness and nihilism is its joyful awe and indeed religious devotion to the natural world. Living on the edge of the Pacific, he found wisdom, strength, and perspective from observing the forces of nature around him. Magnificent, troubling, idiosyncratic, and uneven, Jeffers remains the great prophetic voice of American modernism.

About the Author

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962)

John Robinson Jeffers, the great poet of the American West Coast, was born in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father, William Hamilton Jeffers, was a professor of Old Testament Biblical theology and a Presbyterian minister. A strict disciplinarian and serious intellectual, the elder Jeffers gave his son rigorous private lessons in Greek, Latin, and religion. By the time he was twelve, Jeffers was also fluent in French and German (learned during his schooling in Switzerland), but awkward among other children. Not surprisingly, the boy developed complex feelings toward his deeply loving but authoritarian father.



Robinson Jeffers, 1948 (Photo by Nat Farbman/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Jeffers entered the University of Pittsburgh at fifteen. When his father retired the next year, the family moved to Los Angeles and Jeffers transferred to Occidental College, from which he graduated in 1905 at the age of eighteen. The precocious teenager did graduate work at several universities, studying literature, medicine, and forestry before realizing poetry was his calling.

At the University of Southern California, Jeffers met Una Call Kuster, a beautiful woman who was not only two years older than he, but married to a wealthy local attorney. Robinson and Una fell irrevocably in love. After seven years of guilt-ridden romance with many renunciations, separations, reconciliations, and eventually a public scandal, Una obtained a divorce on August 1, 1913. The next day she and Jeffers married. They traveled north to the wild Big Sur region of coastal California and rented a small cabin in the village of Carmel-by-the-Sea, which they recognized as their "inevitable place."

The twenty-seven-year-old poet knew that he had not yet written anything of enduring value, despite the publication of his first book, *Flagons and Apples* (1912). The death of both Jeffers's father and his own newborn daughter in 1914 heightened his sense of mortality.

After issuing a second collection, *Californians* (1916), Jeffers published nothing for eight years. He divided his time between writing and building a house for his family—which

now included twin sons Donnan and Garth—on a promontory overlooking the Pacific ocean.

In 1924 Jeffers published *Tamar and Other Poems* with a small press in New York. It attracted no initial notice, but a year later it was suddenly taken up by several influential critics. Jeffers produced an expanded trade edition containing what would be his most famous narrative poem, "*Roan Stallion*." Both public and critical opinion were extraordinary. *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* (1925) went into multiple reprintings. Critics compared him to Sophocles and Shakespeare, but Jeffers ignored his sudden celebrity and focused on his work. Over the next ten years he wrote the most remarkable, ambitious, and odd series of narrative poems in American literature, published in eight major collections.

By World War II, Jeffers's critical reputation had collapsed and would not rise again until after his death. In 1945, however, the noted actress Judith Anderson asked the poet to translate and adapt Euripides's classical tragedy *Medea* for the modern stage. When Jeffers's *Medea* opened on Broadway in 1947, it stunned audiences and critics with its power and intensity.

Medea's success relieved Jeffers's financial worries, but the happiest days of his life were now behind him. After Una's slow death from cancer in 1950, he withdrew further from the world. Jeffers published only one book during the last fourteen years of his life, *Hungerfield and Other Poems* (1954). But even as his eyesight failed, he never stopped writing. A few days after his seventy-fifth birthday, he died in his sleep at Tor House.

Jeffers and California

After their marriage in August 1913, Robinson and Una Jeffers hoped to live in England for a while. Before they could finalize their plans, however, World War I began in Europe and they were forced to remain in America. Seeking a coastal village where they could live a simple, quiet life, they decided to visit Carmel, California.

Jeffers had traveled widely in Europe and America, but Carmel and the Big Sur coast were different from any place he had ever been. "For the first time in my life," he later wrote of this first encounter, "I could see people living—amid magnificent unspoiled scenery—essentially as they did in the Idyls or the Sagas, or in Homer's Ithaca. Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will for thousands of years to come. Here was contemporary life that was also permanent life...."

During the next few years, Jeffers hiked the nearby mountains, explored the seacoast, and listened to the stories of people who lived there. He began to feel a profound connection to the landscape. In 1919, when he and Una built Tor House, his feeling of kinship with the land deepened. By 1925, when he completed Hawk Tower, Jeffers and Carmel were one.

"Jeffers Country" extends along the Monterey County coastline from Point Pinos in the north to Lucia and beyond in the south. This stretch of central California includes the Santa Lucia mountains, the Ventana wilderness, and Los Padres National Forest, as well as the rugged canyons and steep cliffs of the incomparable Big Sur. Native Americans inhabited the area for hundreds of years before father Junípero Serra built a mission there in 1771 and before a scattering of settlers arrived—a situation Jeffers alludes to in such poems as "Hands."

By Jeffers's time, the city of Monterey was well established and the small village of Carmel was growing, but the area was mostly wild. "It is not possible to be quite sane here," Jeffers said of the dramatic landscape. Like the local cypresses bent and twisted by the relentless ocean wind, some of the area's people led tortured lives—especially those who lived in remote canyons or in isolated cabins within sight and sound of the sea.

Like his contemporary John Steinbeck, Robinson Jeffers set much of his work against a California backdrop. Through his haunting lyrics and dramatic narrative poems, Jeffers captures the energy and beauty of a landscape he called "the noblest thing I have ever seen."

Tor House and Hawk Tower

Tor House derives its name from the rocky hill (called a "tor" in Gaelic) upon which the house is built. One of the rock outcroppings serves as a cornerstone and is celebrated in the poem "To the Rock That Will be a Cornerstone of the House." Jeffers named Hawk Tower for the hawk that would visit him daily while he worked.

Local contractor M. J. Murphy built the west wing of Tor House (1918–1919); Jeffers's son Donnan completed the east wing in 1957. In the intervening years, after spending mornings writing in the attic by the window looking outward to the mountains, Jeffers labored afternoons to make the other stone structures that compose the buildings collectively known as Tor House: a stone wall and a detached garage (1919–1920), the latter converted to a kitchen in 1954; Hawk Tower (1920–1924); a dining room (1926–1930); and the first floor of the east wing (begun in 1937).

Jeffers gathered the granite stones, which he called "the primitive rock"—more than 80-million-year-old Santa Lucia granite—from the shoreline below Tor House, "each stone Baptized from that abysmal font" ("To the House"). He rolled the stones up from the sea, some of them weighing close to 400 pounds. Working alone, Jeffers built the forty-foot high Hawk Tower for Una. As his hands worked with stone, his mind worked on the poetry he would write the next morning.

In addition to the exceptional stonemasonry—the beautiful Roman arch of the original garage, the flat arches of the north-facing windows of the dining room, the hidden passageway of Hawk Tower—the house and tower are notable for the artifacts that Jeffers embedded in the walls. These include pre-Colombian terra cotta heads from Mexico and small tesserae from the baths of Caracalla in Rome. He painted mottoes and verses on some walls, house beams, and furniture. The house did have running water, but lacked electricity or telephones. In and around the property, Jeffers planted some two thousand trees.

Taken together, the poetry inspired by Tor House, the stonemasonry, the artifacts, the mottoes, and verses make the house and tower a living monument to one of America's greatest poets.

Jeffers and American Culture

In a culture where many believe that "poetry makes nothing happen," Jeffers remains strangely influential among both artists and scientists.

Environmentalists and conservationists consider him an influential figure in the movement to protect natural habitat, wilderness, and coastal land. Guided by Ansel Adams, the Sierra Club's lavish folio *Not Man Apart: Photographs of the Big Sur Coast* combined lines from Jeffers's poetry with photographs in a work that helped focus political efforts to preserve that spectacular stretch of California coastline. Poet Robert Hass calls Jeffers an "early environmentalist," as he was "perhaps the first American poet to grasp the devastating extent of the changes human technologies and populations were wreaking on the rest of the earth's biological life."

Jeffers thoroughly understood and embraced the scientific worldview of his time. Indeed, the physicist Freeman Dyson, writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 1995, compares Jeffers to Einstein and says, "He expressed better than any other poet the scientist's vision." Astronomers and geologists remain interested in his work.

Jeffers's poetry inspired two original and seminal Californian photographers: Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Throughout his life, Ansel Adams was particularly inspired by Jeffers: "I am going to do my best to call attention to the simplicities of environment and method; to 'the enormous beauty of the world,' as Jeffers writes." Morley Baer, another important California photographer, read Jeffers's poems as a college student and many years later claimed, "Jeffers helped me see and sense the coast of California as a place of great tensions, great natural tensions that are part of life and not to be subdued and eradicated."

Many musicians have been inspired by Jeffers's poetry—from jazz musician Walter Tolleson to UCLA geophysics professor Peter Bird. Composer Alva Henderson's first opera, *Medea*—after Jeffers's adaptation—was originally performed by the San Diego Opera. Even the California-born Beach Boys were inspired to write a song after Jeffers's poem "The Beaks of Eagles," which originally appeared on their 1973 album *Holland*.

Jeffers's great triumph is that now—more than seventy-five years after his radical poetic voice first sounded—his poetry retains its power to inspire and disturb.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Robinson Jeffers

1880s

- 1887: John Robinson Jeffers is born near Pittsburgh.
- Publicity from the Southern Pacific railroad company promises unique natural beauty and economic prosperity in California.

1890s

- 1893: Unprecedented drop in U.S. gold supply causes a three-year nationwide depression.
- 1894: Naturalist and conservationist John Muir publishes *The Mountains of California* as part of his ongoing effort to preserve the sublime Californian landscape from the ravages of industry.
- 1898: Beginning of the Spanish-American War.

1900s

- 1901: Theodore Roosevelt takes office as U.S. President.
- 1903: Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* published.
- 1905: Jeffers graduates from Occidental College.
- 1906: An earthquake registering 8.3 on the Richter scale wreaks havoc across the San Francisco Bay area.

1910s

- Jeffers's first book, *Flagns and Apples*, is published in 1912; Jeffers marries Una Call Kuster in 1913.
- World War I erupts in Europe in 1914; America enters in 1917.
- 1918: Armistice signed November 11, ending World War I. The Treaty of Versailles is signed the following year by President Woodrow Wilson.

1920s

- Southern California experiences an oil boom and a population surge, leaving Los Angeles the most motorized city in the USA.

- 1925: Jeffers's acclaimed collection, *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, is published.
- 1927: Charles Lindbergh makes history by flying solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

1930s

- Jeffers publishes several collections of poetry.
- 1932: Due to the Great Depression, unemployment in California hits 28 percent.
- 1933: John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* is published, a novel influenced by Jeffers.
- 1939: Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II in Europe.

1940s

- 1941: The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brings the U.S. into World War II.
- 1945: The war ends after claiming upwards of fifty million lives worldwide.
- 1947: Jeffers's translation of Euripides's *Medea* opens on Broadway to critical acclaim.
- 1948: George Orwell's *1984* published.

1950s

- 1950: Senator Joseph McCarthy brandishes a list of alleged communists in the State Department, heralding the dawn of the Cold War.
- 1952: Ansel Adams and other artists found *Aperture* magazine, dedicated to the art and technique of photography.
- 1954: *Hungerfield and Other Poems* published.

1960s

- 1961: John F. Kennedy takes office as U.S. President; construction of the Berlin Wall begins.
- 1962: Jeffers dies at Tor House on January 20.
- 1963: *The Beginning and the End and Other Poems* is published posthumously as Jeffers's final work.

Other Works/Adaptations

Jeffers's Poetry

Lyric Poetry

During Jeffers's life, the controversies about his narrative poems unfortunately overshadowed the shorter works tucked into the back pages of each new book. These lyric meditations—often autobiographical and generally written in long, rhythmic free-verse lines—marked a new kind of nature poem that tried to understand the physical world not from a human perspective but on its own terms. He rejected rhyme and traditional meter, which inhibited him from telling a story flexibly in verse. Disclaiming the example of Walt Whitman, Jeffers preferred—as scholar Albert Gelpi explains—“to see the long verses of the Hebrew prophets and psalmists in the King James translation or the hexameters of Homer and Aeschylus as more kindred analogues and sources.”

To say that Jeffers's chief imaginative gifts were scope, simplicity, narrative poise, and moral seriousness makes him seem closer to a distinguished jurist than a great poet. But there was something of the judge about Jeffers, particularly the Old Testament variety. In such poems as “Shine, Perishing Republic,” Jeffers warns corrupt humanity against the evils of war and violence. His belief that mankind is not the center of the universe is expressed in poems like “Credo”: “The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the heart-breaking beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it.” When he is gone, he prays—in the poem “Granddaughter”—that his beloved little Una “will find / Powerful protection and a man like a hawk to cover her.”

Although Jeffers knew that he and his sons would die and that the world as they knew it would change, he predicted that “this rock will be here, grave, earnest, / not passive” in his poem “Oh Lovely Rock.” As Jeffers believed, man might be “nature dreaming,” but through hawks, stones, and the ocean, “The Beauty of Things” will endure: “to feel / Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural / Beauty, is the sole business of poetry.”

Narrative Poetry

While Jeffers devoted considerable attention to the lyric form throughout his career, his decision to write narrative poetry led him to the epic tradition and verse drama. From 1925 to 1954, Jeffers wrote the most stunning, ambitious, and stylistically diverse series of narrative poems in American

literature. Originally published in fourteen major collections, these books add up to more than fifteen thousand pages of verse.

Jeffers's epic-length poems such as *Tamar*, *The Women at Point Sur*, *Cawdor*, *Thurso's Landing*, and *The Loving Shepherdess* told the mostly tragic stories of men and women who lived on the Big Sur Coast of California. His verse dramas such as *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, *Dear Judas*, *At the Beginning of an Age*, *Medea*, and *The Cretan Woman* turned to ancient Greece, the Bible, and medieval Europe for inspiration. In both instances, Jeffers used traditional genres, subjects, and themes to interrogate the Western tradition as a whole and to illuminate modern life.

His concern with the latter compelled him to look closely at American culture and the surrounding world. He was usually repelled by what he saw. Identifying “cruelty and filth and superstition” as the three banes of humankind, Jeffers lashed out at the horrific violence of the two World Wars, at the pollution destroying wildlife and ruining natural environments, and at the political and religious fanaticism darkening the minds of millions.

Almost immediately Jeffers's long narrative poems divided audiences. Violent, sexual, philosophical, and subversive, these verse novels are alternately magnificent and hyperbolic, powerful and excessive, dramatic and overblown, and unlike anything else in modernist American poetry.

The Plays of Robinson Jeffers

- *The Cretan Woman*. First produced in 1954.
- *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. First produced in November 1950.
- *Medea*. New York: Random House, 1946. Reprinted with “Cawdor.” New York: New Directions, 1970. First produced in October 1947.

Discussion Questions

1. Robinson Jeffers studied literature, philosophy, medicine, and forestry in graduate school. How do these four areas of study inform the subject matter and style of Jeffers's poetry?
2. Jeffers and his wife, Una, discovered the coast of Carmel to be their "inevitable place." How does this landscape inform his poetry? Where is your "inevitable place"?
3. What parallels can you imagine between the building of a stone house and the writing of a poem? Can you find examples of this parallel in Jeffers's poetry?
4. Many mammals and birds—especially the red-tailed hawk and the falcon—appear in Jeffers's poetry. While his allusions to animals are certainly literal, what symbolic possibilities exist in poems such as "Rock and Hawk" or "Hurt Hawks"?
5. In his poem "Carmel Point," Jeffers declares that "people are a tide / That swells and in time will ebb, and all / Their works dissolve." How poignant is the parallel Jeffers makes between the human race and the tide?

Additional Resources

Published Resources

There are four paperback anthologies containing selected poetry of Robinson Jeffers, two published by Stanford University Press. *The Wild God of the World: An Anthology of Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Albert Gelpi, also contains the long poem "Cawdor" (2003). Tim Hunt edited a longer anthology, *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, in 2001. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, also edited by Hunt, is a five-volume collection published between 1988 and 2001.

All poetry cited in this Reader's Guide is available on the Poetry Foundation's website at www.poetryfoundation.org.

Selected Books about Jeffers and His Poetry

- Greenan, Edith. *Of Una Jeffers: A Memoir*. Ed. James Karman. Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1998.
- Karman, James. *Robinson Jeffers: Poet and Prophet*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.
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Credits

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Robinson Jeffers, "Carmel Point" and excerpts from "Tor House," "For Una," "De Rerum Virtute" and "The Beauty of Things," from *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Copyright 1935 and © 1963 by Donnan Jeffers and Garth Jeffers. Used by permission of Random House, Inc.

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