**Jeffers, (John) Robinson (1887-1962)**

Renowned as the “poet of Carmel-Sur” (Brophy), Robinson Jeffers held a place of prominence in American literature from the mid-1920s through the 1930s. He lived in seclusion with his family at Tor House, which he built from sea-worn granite on a promontory in Carmel, California. There he developed his signature style of graphically tragic narrative poems and verse dramas, typically set in the surrounding landscape and accompanied by meditative lyric poems exploring related themes. Jeffers eschewed high modernism’s post-Symbolist aesthetics for what he saw as its withdrawal from reality, crafting instead a free verse style that employed long, rhythmically stressed lines and a solemn tone. His prosody and themes are coloured by his non-anthropocentric philosophy, which he named Inhumanism. The critical acclaim turned to disfavour during the Depression era and the Second World War, and his popularity fluctuated then dwindled. Critical interest was renewed in the 1970s and 1980s, and readership has since increased, particularly due to the timeliness of his acute environmental aesthetics.

Born on January 10, 1887, John Robinson Jeffers was the eldest son of Annie Robinson (Tuttle) and Dr. William Hamilton Jeffers, a Presbyterian minister and seminary professor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Jeffers’s younger brother, Hamilton, became an astronomer at the Lick Observatory. After the family relocated to California in 1903, Jeffers entered Occidental College where his earlier education in the Judeo-Christian and classical tradition was extended, supplemented by sciences such as geology and astronomy. He was drawn to the Pre-Raphaelite and Romantic poets in his youth, and his first self-published collection of poems, *Flagons and Apples* (1912), features conventional lyrics informed by these early influences.

From 1905 through 1913, Jeffers pursued graduate studies in the humanities, medicine, and forestry. During those years, an intermittent affair occurred between Jeffers and classmate, Una Call Kuster, culminating in her divorce and their marriage in 1913. The couple moved to Carmel the following year, where there was a flourishing artist colony, including photographer Edward Weston and Jeffers’s future intimate and advocate, poet George Sterling. Under various stimuli, particularly the rugged Pacific coast and the outbreak of the First World War, Jeffers’s distinctive literary style emerged between *Californians* (Macmillan, 1916) and the privately published Tamar and Other Poems (1924). When the latter received critical reception, it was reissued with new compositions as Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems (1925) by the publisher Boni and Liveright, launching him into national fame. Eight subsequent major collections were published over the next two decades. At the apex of his career, on April 4, 1932, the cover of *Time* magazine featured a Weston portrait of Jeffers, the first American poet so honored.

Early in 1941, Jeffers conducted a rare but successful reading tour centered on his delivery of the inaugural address of the Library of Congress’s “The Poet and Democracy” series. In 1947-1948, his adaptation of Euripides’s *Medea* was a success on Broadway and elsewhere, with actress and friend Dame Judith Anderson in the lead role. However, his increasingly morose expression of antipathy toward features of modern civilization and American involvement in World War II severely eroded his popularity, and *The Double Axe* (1948) met with scathing criticism. In the decade after Una’s death in 1950, the decline in his health and spirits was matched by the output of his verse. He published one final volume, *Hungerfield and Other Poems* (1954). A posthumous collection, *The Beginning and the End and Other Poems* (1963), was edited and published a year after his death on January 20, 1962.

Like his modernist contemporaries, Jeffers drew on myth, anthropology and theoretical psychology for his poetry. His writing is uniquely informed, however, by his scientific learning and Inhumanist philosophy, a pantheistic naturalism that sees humanity as a troubled and ultimately insignificant part of the divine universe. This distinguishing quality, along with his attention to place, has drawn the interest of deep ecologists and environmental critics across the humanities. His practice of stonemasonry, sustained from 1919 until his latter years, was also a considerable correlative of his poetics and regionalism. Tor House and its forty-foot Hawk Tower are preserved under the Tor House Foundation as an enduring monument to Jeffers and his singular bond with the wild Pacific coast.

**References and Further Reading**

[reference cited in text] Brophy, Robert. “Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Carmel-Sur.” Brophy 1-18. [if annotation required: A biographical overview, with discussion of major themes and influences.]

**Further information**:

Rhapsody and Requiem: The Life of Robinson Jeffers (documentary film from 1967, San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/189961>

Robinson Jeffers Studies Association: publishes the journal *Jeffers Studies*, holds an annual conference, and maintains a website: <http://www.robinsonjeffersassociation.com/>

**Further Reading**:

**Critical Essay Collections**

Brophy, Robert, ed. *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1995. A collection of essays that explore the poet’s worldview, poetics, and reception. Includes a review of Jeffers scholarship and a chronological, annotated bibliography of Jeffers’s volumes.

Karman, James, ed. *Critical Essays on Robinson Jeffers*. Boston: Hall, 1990. Includes representative reviews of each of Jeffers’s poetry collections and a selection of thirteen previously published critical essays.

Thesing, William B., ed. *Robinson Jeffers and a Galaxy of Writers: Essays in Honor of William H. Nolte*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995. Essays in this collection advance the critical positioning Jeffers among his poetic forebears and modern and contemporary literary figures.

Zaller, Robert, ed. *Centennial Essays for Robinson Jeffers.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991. A commemoration of Jeffers’s centennial year, with nine commissioned essays by leading Jeffers scholars and a selection of salient previously published essays, including forewords by Everson and a chapter by Czesław Miłosz.

**Biographical:**

Adamic, Louis. *Robinson Jeffers: A Portrait*. Seattle: University of Washington Chapbooks, 1929. Rpt. Covelo, CA: Yolla Bolly Press, 1983. An early biography by Slovenian American author and political activist. Reprint features a foreword by Garth Jeffers.

Bennett, Melba Berry. *The Stone Mason of Tor House: The Life and Work of Robinson Jeffers*. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1966. Authored by family friend who became Jeffers’s secretary after Una’s death and founding editor of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*. Provides intriguing details, though criticized for some inaccuracy.

Carpenter, Frederic I. *Robinson Jeffers*. New York: Twayne, 1962. Twayne’s United States Author Series. Chronological survey of Jeffers’s life and career, including critical analysis of his long and short form poetry and philosophy. Includes selected bibliography, now dated.

Greenan, Edith. *Of Una Jeffers: A Memoir*. 1939. Rpt. ed. James Karman. Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1998. Personal account by Una’s close friend, her first husband Edward Kuster’s second wife and sometime Carmel neighbour. Includes photos and introduction by the editor, Jeffers’s scholar Karman.

Karman, James.“The Life and Work of Robinson Jeffers.” Introduction. *The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers Volume One, 1890-1930*. Karman 1-134. (see list of works, Prose) A biographical and bibliographical overview that contextualizes the poet and his work in terms of literary and socio-political history.

*---. Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1987. The Literary West Series. Rpt. Revised Ed. Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1994. The essential biographical study of Jeffers, including bibliographical information (now incomplete).

Luhan, Mabel Dodge. *Una and Robin*. Berkeley: University of California: Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1976. An intimate portrayal written from the perspective of the art patron’s friendship with Una in the 1930s.

Powell, Lawrence Clark. *Robinson Jeffers: The Man and His Work*. Los Angeles: Primavera Press, 1934. Foreword by Jeffers. Rpt. Pasadena: San Pasqual Press, 1940; New York: Haskell House, 1970. The first critical, if somewhat laudatory, introduction to the poet and his influences by celebrated University of California librarian-scholar. Includes bibliographical information, now dated.

Sterling, George. *Robinson Jeffers: The Man and the Artist*. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926. Earliest biography, a personal tribute by Californian poet and friend of Jeffers.

**List of Works (chronological order)**

*The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. 5 Vols. Ed. Tim Hunt.  Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988-2001. Volume four features selections of early poetry, all the major prose, and unpublished writings. Volume five includes detailed manuscript and publication history of every poem.

*Flagons and Apples*. Los Angeles: Grafton Publishing, 1912. Reissued by Cayucos Books, 1970. Originally self-published, features conventional romantic love lyrics.

*Californians*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. Reissued by Cayucos Books, 1971. Lyrics and narrative poems in the Romantic vein, situated in the Big Sur country, drawing on local folklore and touching on significant emerging themes.

*Tamar and Other Poems*. New York: Peter Boyle, 1924.  Widely recognized as the departure point of Jeffers’s signature prosody of syllabic, long, unrhymed lines and natural diction. Thematic explorations of human passion set within sublime natural landscape with biblical, classical, and mythical allusions; the title narrative poem features familial conflict, psychological intensities, and violence, including rape, incest and murder. Critical reception gained him national recognition.

*Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925.  The *Tamar* volume expanded with a new, California-Pasiphae narrative and a verse drama based on Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, “The Tower Beyond Tragedy.” Reissued New York: Random House Modern Library, 1935. Reissue revitalized Jeffers’s reputation; includes additional poems from the 1927 *A Miscellany of American Poetry* and a significant introduction by Jeffers.

*The Women at Point Sur*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927. Narrative concerning a charismatic ex-minister who self-identifies with God, takes on violently transgressive behavior and leads his followers into ruin before his own destruction.  Reissued by Auburn, California: Blue Oak, 1975 with afterword by Bill Hotchkiss. See special reissue, 1977.

*Cawdor and Other Poems*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1928.  Adaptation of the Theseus-Hippolytus-Phaedra theme set on a ranch in Big Sur, California. “Cawdor” reprinted along with *Medea* by New Directions in 1970.

*Dear Judas and Other Poems*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1929. Themes of human power and psychological identification with God explored in both the title poem, a Japanese Noh form verse-drama with an inversion of the Jesus-Judas roles, and in the narrative poem, “The Loving Shepherdess,” set on the Sur coast and featuring a tragic female Christ-figure. Reissued by New York: Norton-Liveright, 1977, with afterword and textual note by Robert Brophy.

*Descent to the Dead*. New York: Random House, 1931. A limited edition of sixteen poems inspired by the 1929 family trip through Ireland, Scotland, and England. Included in *Give Your Heart to the Hawks* (1933) and *Selected Poetry* (1938).

*Thurso’s Landing and Other Poems*. New York: Liveright, 1932. Title narrative poem is a domestic tragedy set in the Big Sur region, featuring a protagonist who suffers with Promethean-like endurance infidelity, failure, and physical and psychological pain. Includes another narrative, “Margrave,” and nine short lyrics.

*Give Your Heart to the Hawks and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1933. Long narrative title poem set on a Big Sur ranch centred on a love triangle-murder with motifs from the Cain and Abel story and Greek myth. Includes *Descent to the Dead* and other lyric poems, a post-Trojan war verse drama “At the Fall of An Age,” and “Resurrection,” a narrative poem ghost story set in Big Sur region post-World War I.

*Solstice and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1935.  Features a mid-length narrative set in the Big Sur region drawing from both the Medea myth and the Völsung Saga. The latter is also revisited in “At the Birth of an Age” to explore tensions within the collective consciousness of modern western civilization associated with the Jeffersian motif of the self-hanged God.

*Such Counsels You Gave to Me and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1937. Title poem employs the Oedipal theme to explore the intermingling of modern science and technology with human desire for domination over other humans and nature. Short poems are mostly prophetic and meditative lyrics.

*Be Angry at the Sun and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1941. Published on the verge of America entering World War II, both short and long poems are concerned with contemporary events and issues, regionalized in the narrative “Mara” and in “Bowl of Blood,” a verse-drama of paranormal-psychological dimensions.

*The Double Axe and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1948. Features two-part title poem, “The Love and The Hate” and “The Inhumanist.” both politically engaged narrative poems concerning World War II, the former depicting excessively violent reaction to war, the latter an ideal philosophical detachment. Third part features similarly themed shorter poems. Includes publisher’s disclaimer. Reissued in 1977 with eleven “suppressed poems.”

*Hungerfield and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1954. Poems written after the death of Jeffers’s wife, Una. The title narrative is a Gothic tale in which the protagonist wrestles with personified Death and brings ruin upon his household; features an elegiac lyric frame in which the poet mourns his wife’s passing.

*The Beginning and the End and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1963. Posthumous publication of last poems collected, titled and edited—some critics suggest problematically—by Jeffers’s friend and secretary, Melba Bennett.

**Drama**

*Medea, Freely Adapted from the Medea of Euripides*. New York: Random House, 1946. Successful Broadway production (1947), cross-country tour (1947-49), and international performances with Judith Anderson, who commissioned its writing, in the lead role. Reissued with “Cawdor” in 1970.

*Dear Judas*. First published in 1929, its production by the Mansfield Theatre, New York had a truncated run on Broadway (sixteen shows) in October 1947 after meeting with opposition in Maine and Boston.

*Tower Beyond Tragedy*. Published in *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* (1925), the play was staged by the American National Theatre and Academy with Judith Anderson in the role of Clytemnestra in 1950, following earlier productions in California (1933, 1941).

*The Cretan Woman*. Composed during Jeffers’s recovery from a near-fatal illness while in Ireland in 1948, it was published in *Hungerfield and Other Poems* (1954) as a verse drama adaptation of the Phaedra-Theseus story based on Euripides’s *Hippolytus.* In the same year, it was performed at the President Theatre in New York, the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and it enjoyed a successful run at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village under the production of the off-broadway company, The Players Theatre.

**Selected poetry, anthologies**

*The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. New York: Random House, 1938. Comprehensive collection, excluding poems published in 1912 and 1916; includes important foreword by the poet. In print for over fifty years.

*Robinson Jeffers: Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage, l965. Paperback collection, mostly lyrics.

*Not Man Apart: Lines from Robinson Jeffers / Photographs of the Big Sur Coast*. Ed. David Brower. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1965. Portraits of the region by famous regional photographers (including Ansel Adams, Morley Baer, Edward Weston) alongside excerpts from Jeffers’s poetry. With foreword by Loren Eiseley.

*Jeffers Country: The Seed Plots of Robinson Jeffers’ Poetry*. San Francisco: Scrimshaw Press, 1971. Featuring selections of Jeffers’s poetry alongside photographs of Big Sur region by Horace Lyon. Original prefaces by Robinson and Una Jeffers.

*Robinson Jeffers: Selected Poems*. The Centenary Edition.  Ed. Colin Falck. Manchester: Carcanet, 1987. Marking Jeffers’s centennial year, this collection features an introductory essay by the editor, an English poet and critic, titled, “Robinson Jeffers: American Romantic.” Includes lyrics, three short narratives, and an excerpt from “Medea.”

*Rock and Hawk: A Selection of Shorter Poems by Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Robert Hass. New York: Random House, 1987. Important introduction by editor and poet Hass to reintroduce Jeffers in his centennial year. Mostly lyrics with six short narratives or excerpts, including “Roan Stallion.”

*Stones of the Sur: Poetry by Robinson Jeffers, Photographs by Morley Baer*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. Following Lyon’s precedent, Baer instigated this project with collaborator James Karman to interpret Jeffers’s “mysticism of stone” (“Rock and Hawk”) in fifty photographs paired with full or excerpted poems by Jeffers selected and introduced by Karman.

*The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Tim Hunt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. A broad representation from Jeffers’s entire career, adopted from the texts of *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, including a sampling of unpublished poems as well as prose pieces.

*The Wild God of the World: An Anthology of Robinson Jeffers.*Ed. Albert Gelpi. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. Informative biographical and critical introduction by the editor, “Robinson Jeffers and the Sublime,” which positions Jeffers in the tradition of the sublime, offering a rationale for the selection of short poems, both lyric and meditative stanzas, that appear alongside “Cawdor.”

**Special Reissues, Posthumous Publications** (in chronological order)

*Cawdor and Medea*. New York: New Directions, 1970. Reissue of the 1928 narrative and 1946 verse drama. Introduction and notes by poet and Jeffers scholar, William Everson.

*The Alpine Christ and Other Poems*. Ed. William Everson. N.p.: Cayucos Books, 1974. Early lyrics, most previously unpublished, with a fragment from the unpublished title verse drama, a passion play set during World War I. With preface, introduction, and afterward by the editor.

*Brides of the South Wind: Poems 1917-1922*. Ed. William Everson. N.p.: Cayucos Books, 1974. Early published and unpublished poems with preface, introduction, and afterward by the editor.

*In This Wild Water*. Ed. James Shebl. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie, 1976. Limited edition of poems from the original *The Double Axe* manuscripts “suppressed” by the editors of Random House due to wartime sensitivities. Includes correspondence from publishers and preface by Robert Brophy.

*The Women at Point Sur and Other Poems*. New York: Norton-Liveright, 1977. Expanded reissue with five poems originally intended for the 1927 volume; textual note and afterword by Jeffers’s scholar, Tim Hunt.

*The Double Axe and Other Poems.* New York: Norton-Liveright, 1977.  Reissue includes eleven “suppressed poems” (printed in 1976 as *In This Wild Water*), a foreword by William Everson and afterword by Bill Hotchkiss, both of whom are self-proclaimed poet-followers of Jeffers.

*What Odd Expedients and Other Poems.* Ed. Robert Ian Scott. Hamden, Connecticut: Shoestring, 1981. Twenty-five mostly unpublished poems written about World War II, with introduction and commentary by the editor.

*Songs and Heroes***.** Ed. Robert Brophy. Los Angeles: Arundel, 1988. Unpublished poems from the early years of *Flagons and Apples*.

**Prose**

*Poetry, Gongorism and a Thousand Years*. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie, 1949. New York Times article penned by Jeffers in 1948, defining his idea of the “great poet” and “great poetry.”

*Themes in My Poems*. San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1956. Based on Jeffers’s lectures on his Eastern US tour in 1941 at the Library of Congress, Harvard University, and other venues. Offers important insight into the poet’s self-understanding of his symbolism, major concerns, and philosophy.

**Letters**

*The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Ann Ridgeway. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968. Annotated correspondence from 1897-1962. With a foreword by Mark Van Doren and photographs by Leigh Wiener.

*Where Shall I Take You To: The Love Letters Of Una And Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Robert Kafka. Foreword by Garth Jeffers. N.p.: Yolla Bolly Press, l987. Letters written 1910-1913, selected from papers at the University of Texas, Austin.

*The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers*. 2 vols. to date. Ed. James Karman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009- . With annotations, including footnotes. Vol. 1 contains letters written in the period 1890-1930 and includes a comprehensive biographical and bibliographical introduction; Vol. 2, 1931-1939, includes illustrations.

**Jeffers Paratextual hyperlinks**

**Jeffers** Photo:

George Weston **ID Number:** 81.285.9 <http://ccp.uair.arizona.edu/subject-person/jeffers-robinson>

other possibilities:

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf5c600832/?query=Robinson%20Jeffers&brand=calisphere>

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft9s2009tn/>

Also: <http://www.robinsonjeffersassociation.org/who-was-robinson-jeffers/photo-gallery/>

**Big Sur** map: <http://www.robinsonjeffersassociation.org/who-was-robinson-jeffers/jeffers-country/jeffers-country-3/>

**Big Sur coastline** photo by Cole Weston, pub. in *Not Man Apart: Photographs of the Big Sur Coast / Lines from Robinson Jeffers* : http://www.google.ca/imgres?q=morley+baer+photography&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=xHQ&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&biw=1440&bih=718&tbm=isch&tbnid=ntV--5WjbIAYDM:&imgrefurl=http://www.wildnesswithin.com/2001/01-3/nma.html&docid=xLj1NPIw33gdxM&imgurl=http://www.wildnesswithin.com/2001/01-3/nma.gif&w=608&h=799&ei=ouaWT7TgGMWFiAKDqamsCg&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=188&vpy=333&dur=5092&hovh=257&hovw=196&tx=102&ty=107&sig=115429114815748056661&page=2&tbnh=174&tbnw=132&start=18&ndsp=25&ved=1t:429,r:12,s:18,i:134

other possibility: “Robinson Jeffers’s Big Sur” photogallery: <http://www.latimes.com/travel/la-tr-jeffers6-2009sep06-pg,0,3412426.photogallery>

**Lick Observatory**: <http://www.ucolick.org/public/index.html>

**Occidental Jeffers exhibit**: <http://departments.oxy.edu/library/geninfo/collections/special/jeffers/>

**Una**: <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5r29p05k/?query=Jeffers&brand=calisphere>

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft967nb689/?query=Jeffers&brand=calisphere>

<http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft967nb689/?query=Jeffers&brand=calisphere>

**Edward Weston**: <http://www.edward-weston.com/edward_weston_point_lobos.htm>

**George Sterling**: <http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=GEORGE_STERLING>

**Jeffers on the cover of Time, April 4, 1932**, photo by Edward Weston: <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19320404,00.html>

**Robinson Jeffers introducing and reading his poems in 1941**; manuscript published as “The Poet in a Democracy” in *The Collected Poetry Vol. 4* incl. “O Lovely Rock” and “The Day is a Poem” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jI3mtBFfl1M&feature=list_related&playnext=1&list=AL94UKMTqg-9ANtDwkktM6cHV332_PdIMs>

**Dame Judith Anderson as Medea**: photo of Medea playbill: <http://www.robinsonjeffersassociation.org/?attachment_id=332>

biography:http://www.nla.gov.au/prompt/dame-judith-anderson

**Medea (film), Jeffers’s adaptation of Euripides’s tragedy, directed by Mark Cullingham, performed by Zoe Ada Caldwell, Judith Anderson & Mitch Ryan, (Films For The Humanities & Sciences, 1982), 86:04 min.** Princeton, NJ : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, [2004], c1982

(NB: not the original Broadway production in which Anderson played Medea)

<http://ativ.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/View/657530>

**Synopsis of the deep ecology movement**:

<http://www.deepecology.org/movement.htm>

or

<http://www.eoearth.org/article/Deep_ecology>

**Jeffers working with stone**, photo by Horace Lyon:

<http://www.robinsonjeffersassociation.org/?attachment_id=335>

**Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation** <http://www.torhouse.org/>