

Anne Hunter

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Poet Anne Hunter (née Home), born in Ireland in 1742, was the eldest daughter of marine surgeon Robert Home. Circa 1758, the Hunter family moved to Scotland, where Anne Hunter likely received education in Edinburgh. After a prolonged seven-year engagement, Anne married surgeon John Hunter in 1771. Before her marriage, Hunter began to publish some of her poems and lyrics anonymously. Her first published poem, “Adieu ye Stream,” appeared in *The Black Bird* periodical in 1764. In 1765, the poem appeared in *The Lark* and *The Charmer*. In the early 1790s, Hunter met and began collaborating with Joseph Haydn, and by 1792, she was writing lyrics for Haydn’s music. Hunter wrote anonymous lyrics for all the *Six Original Canzonettas* (1794) for Haydn, as well as some of the lyrics in his *Second Set of Canzonettas* (1795). Today, Hunter is best known for her words set to Haydn’s music rather than her other poetry, due to the fame of the latter.

During her life, she published two collections. In 1802, Hunter collected and published her sixty-piece *Poems*, dedicated to her son, Captain John Banks Hunter. This formally established Hunter as the author of her previously anonymous poems, revealing her poetic identity to the public. In 1804, she published *The Sports of the Genii*, comprised of her poems written in 1797, inspired by the paintings of the artist Susan MacDonald, who died in 1803. Hunter’s poems and songs achieved compliments from the public and were widely distributed. Some of her personal works expressed both her inner emotions and depression. Poets such as George Thomson and Joanna Baillie also included some of her unpublished poems with their own. On 7 June 1832, Hunter died from a lingering illness and was buried in the St. Marylebone churchyard of London. In 2009, Careline Grigson collected and published over two hundred of Hunter’s poems, including some from newly discovered manuscripts.

Hunter had four children, all born during the first five years of her marriage; unfortunately, only two survived their childhood years. Due to limited medical measures, including surgery, midwifery practices, environment, and hospital care in the eighteenth century, more than half of the infants baptized in London between 1770–89 passed before age five, mainly due to infections (See McKeown and Brown 135). Written in iambic pentameter couplets, the following poem, “To the Memory of a Lovely Infant, Written Seven Years After His Death,” published 1802 in *Poems*, is an elegy for her second son, James Hunter,

who was born in 1774 but passed away in February 1775. This poem may carry a particular significance as it memorializes the loss of her child, especially a male infant.

Further Reading

Oppenheimer, Jane M. "Anne Home Hunter and her Friends." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1946, pp. 434–445.

Slagle, Judith Bailey. "Opposing the Medical World: The Poetry of Anne Home Hunter." *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 39, no. 3, June 2008, pp. 102–107.

References

McKeown, Thomas, and R. G. Brown. "Medical Evidence Related to English Population Changes in the Eighteenth Century." *Population Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, Nov. 1955, pp. 119–41

To the Memory of a Lovely Infant, Written Seven Years After His Death ³⁴⁹

STILL as the circling months successive climb,
 With ling'ring footsteps, up the steep of time,
 Bleak February³⁵⁰ frowns in his return,
 And crowns with cypress a sepulchral³⁵¹ urn.
 For me he still a mournful aspect wears, 5
 And still receives the tribute of my tears.
 Are not the ills enough which time supplies,
 To check the dawning comforts in their rise?
 Must memory too the present evils aid,
 And tinge with darker hues life's deep'ning shade? 10
 Must woes on woes accumulated roll,
 And cloud with care the sunshine of the soul?
 Such is our wretched lot, ill-fated kind!
 Our thread of life with misery entwin'd;
 Capricious³⁵² fortune's sport,³⁵³ or passion's slave; 15
 Till peace takes root, and blossoms on the grave.
 Can I forget the days of anxious pain,
 When that dear angel form I watch'd in vain?
 Can I forget the agonizing hour
 When those lov'd eyes were clos'd, to wake no more? 20
 Ah, no! revolving years in vain depart,

³⁴⁹ *Poems, by Mrs. John Hunter*. London, Printed for Payne and Bensley, 1802, pp. [55]–57. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

³⁵⁰ *February* Hunter's second son, James Hunter, passed away in February 1775; here, Hunter personifies the month she hates to see again

³⁵¹ *sepulchral* burial and funeral customs

³⁵² *Capricious* whimsical and humorous, driven by whim or fancy

³⁵³ *sport* source of amusement

The traces still remain upon my heart!

When lost in grief, my eyes refus'd a tear,

Instinctive fondness sought his silent bier,³⁵⁴

Hope whisper'd, "sure he sleeps," I wildly press'd

The lovely image³⁵⁵ to my aching breast,

And felt the fearful chill of nature's awful rest.

Now I can weep, and oft³⁵⁶ in thought recall

The closing scene,³⁵⁷ the coffin, and the pall.³⁵⁸

The solemn knell³⁵⁹ of death, I heard it toll;

How heavily it struck my wounded soul!

'Tis long since past; forgetfulness has spread

Her misty mantle³⁶⁰ o'er³⁶¹ unnumber'd dead;

But fond affection lingers in the gloom;

Near the dim lamp that glimmers o'er the tomb

She graves³⁶² with trembling hand the mournful rhyme,

Where memory recalls departed time,

Brings back in one short hour the dream of years,

And sprinkles on the grave a mother's tears.



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³⁵⁴ *bier* a mobile stand that carries the corpse (whether or not in a coffin) to the grave before burial

³⁵⁵ *image* as a corpse, the baby is now only an image/representation of a person

³⁵⁶ *oft* often

³⁵⁷ *scene* a physical location or setting which a specific event happens

³⁵⁸ *pall* "a cloth, usually of black, purple, or white velvet, spread over a coffin, hearse, or tomb." (OED)

³⁵⁹ *knell* a bell sound that announces a person's death

³⁶⁰ *mantle* "a loose sleeveless cloak" (OED)

³⁶¹ *o'er* over

³⁶² *graves* engraves the tombstone