

## ENGLISH: *BIRTHDAY LETTERS*

In light of this recording [Sylvia Plath reading “Daddy” – YouTube], analyse the conflicting perspectives that underpin representations of the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

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Representation of events, situations and personalities are affected by the subjectivity of composers, which creates conflicting perspectives. Context is ultimately what shapes and influences the meaning of a text and how it is composed. This is evident within the conflicting perspectives of the fractious relationship between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Hughes’ collection of poems “Birthday Letters” can be seen as an attempt to justify his marriage with Plath after thirty-five years of suppressing the nature of their relationship. Within his poems *Your Paris*, *The Shot* and *Red*, Hughes represents himself as the victim of Plath’s instability, however this differs significantly from Plath’s perspective within her poem *Daddy*, where she blames both Hughes and her late father for her suffering. Hughes’ guilt surrounding their matrimony is seen within his letter to Aurelia Plath on the 15th March 1963 where he takes the blame for the failure of his marriage. Both poets are deeply flawed and therefore are both contributing factors towards Plath’s destruction.

Artists choose how they present themselves or others within their work in order to convey their perspective. Within *Your Paris*, Hughes’ subjectivity through his autobiographical poem highlights the conflicting perspectives through juxtaposing Hughes’ war inflicted Paris with Plath’s “American”, artistic view of the city, however, she adopts this view to escape her mental trauma. The idiomatic language within “your lingo/always like an emergency burn-off/to protect you from spontaneous combustion/protected you” highlights how Plath expressed herself through art in order to hide her psychological obsession with her father. Hughes proceeds to justify his part in the breakdown of his marriage, “...a dream where you could not/Wake or find...The Minotaur to put a blessed end/To the torment.” This enjambment suggests that Plath was vulnerable before she met Hughes, and her continual suffering was because of her father, and not Hughes. Hughes portrays himself as the victim merely trying to support his unstable wife from deteriorating therefore emitting subjectivity as he justifies his marriage with Plath.

Inner thoughts and feeling are more true and unguarded in the wake of loss, therefore causing responders to receive a true representation of a situation or event. Within Ted Hughes letter to Aurelia Plath on the 15th March 1963, he expresses his guilt surrounding his wife’s death to his mother-in-law. Hughes emphasises his loss and remorse of the event throughout the letter, “I don’t want ever to be forgiven” and “If I hadn’t been so blindly...I could have seen through all this!” This exclamatory language of Hughes’ culpability concerning his relationship with Plath conflicts with his perspective shown within “*Birthday Letters*”. The subjectivity within his poems represents Hughes as the victim and Plath as psychologically unstable however, within his letter to Aurelia, responders see that he does take the blame for the breakdown of their marriage. Therefore, this letter conflicts with the subjectivity of “*Birthday Letters*” and Hughes representation of his relationship with Plath.

Hughes’ release of “*Birthday Letters*” is used to convey his perspective of his relationship with Plath to responders. Within *The Shot*, Hughes presents himself as a powerless victim of Plath’s neurotic obsession with her deceased father. The poem outlines Plath’s need for a “God” figure to replace her father, which she found within Hughes, however, Hughes did not realise the complexity of Plath’s personality, “Vague as mist, I did not even know/I had been hit”. This simile emphasises that it was her father’s death and her Electra-like obsession with him that caused a struggle within Plath and Hughes’ marriage. Hughes uses the sustained metaphor of a bullet within the poem to show Plath’s desire to be reunited with her father and yet to also punish him for leaving her, accentuating her indecision and complex personality. Hughes representation of Plath within *The Shot* justifies that Plath’s destruction was not because of him, but because of her predetermined neurosis, contrasting from Plath’s perspective within her poem *Daddy*.

Perspectives can be compared through contrasting composer's work, which outline the same event, personality or situation. Sylvia Plath's confessional poem *Daddy* presents her perspective on her relationship with Ted Hughes and her late father, Otto Plath, which differs greatly from Hughes perspective within "Birthday Letters". Plath deems herself to be a victim of patriarchal society, particularly within her marriage to Hughes, which she believes was the cause of her instability, "Panzer-man, panzer-man". This pun refers to Hughes adulterous behaviour and thus emphasising she is the victim of Hughes philander. Plath feels betrayed by Hughes and her father referring to them as "a Brute" and a "bastard" respectively and by the completion of the poem, decides to no longer depend on men, "I'm through." Plath's perspective conflicts with Hughes views on their relationship, as she believes he is the problem within their marriage, and his actions led to her destruction.

Retrospect can cause prejudice as time alters one's memories of an individual's personality. Within Hughes final poem of his collection, *Red*, he recalls that his late wife's suffering was an intrinsic part of her personality, and that she used it to compose poetry. Hughes recollection is questioned within the rhetorical question, "Blood-red. Was it blood?" revealing he is still attempting to understand Plath's personality through the symbolic colour red to represent her decision to suffer. Hughes continues to present himself as the victim of his marriage and that Plath's suicide was self-inflicted, justifying his relationship to responders, "Everything you painted you painted white/Then splashed it with roses, defeated it." This imagery highlights that she consciously looked for pain and suffering when she was in a serene state emphasising the complexity of her personality. Hughes conveys that he and his marriage to Plath began to suffer because of her neurosis therefore conflicting with her perspective shown within *Daddy*.

How events, situations and personalities are represented affect the subjectivity of composers, which creates conflicting perspectives. Ultimately, context shapes and influences meaning and how it is composed. Conflicting perspectives of the disjointed relationship between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath is seen within Hughes' collection of poems "Birthday Letters", which is an attempt to justify his marriage to Plath after many years of suppressing the nature of their relationship. His poems *Your Paris*, *The Shot* and *Red*, present Hughes as the victim of his wife's vulnerability. This differs considerably from Plath's perspective within her poem *Daddy* where she blames both Hughes and her deceased father for her suffering. Hughes does however take the blame for the failure of his marriage to Sylvia Plath within his letter to Aurelia Plath on the 15th March 1963, where he expresses his guilt therefore conflicting with his perspective within "Birthday Letters". Hughes and Plath's flawed characteristics contribute to the breakdown of their marriage and the latter's destruction.