

ENGLISH: *BIRTHDAY LETTERS*

Birthday Letters

Conflicting perspectives are constructs shaping a way of viewing the world and are characterised by selection, omission and emphasis. Consequently, this can give rise to a myriad of interpretations each with their own intricate and diverse representation of a particular personality, event or situation. This is elucidated in Ted Hughes's anthology and confessional poetry in *Birthday Letters*, Frida Kahlo's self portrait "On the border between America and Mexico" and Angela Bennie's media article "The poet laureate and the feminist martyr". Through the conscious construction and versification of texts it is evident that composer's make an undoubted attempt to vindicate and justify their behaviour.

Hughes's conscious construction of his relationship with Plath in the poem "the minotaur" suggests that conflicting perspectives arise as individuals vindicate and justify their behavior. This poem captures Hughes' reconstruction of an event that acted as a catalyst to a major conflict in their relationship. From the outset, the composer employs enjambment that frames a frenetic pace and atmosphere, which also permeates throughout 'The shot'. In turn, this lends itself to the characterization of Plath as highly irrational and emotionally volatile. The positioning of the responder to empathize with the composer's perspective is strengthened in the diction and subversion of chronology that downplays Hughes' being "twenty minutes late for baby minding". Subsequently this strengthens the sustained motif that Plath is mentally dysfunctional, which is used to help correct negative public perceptions held towards Hughes. Additionally, the metaphor of the labyrinth as a symbol of the mysterious psyche of Plath is played out in detail, again stressing Hughes' situation trying to decipher the incomprehensible, an implicit justification of his role in their turbulent relationship. The fifth quatrain furthers this representation with cumulative use of the jarring personal pronoun "your", creating an accusatory tone that mitigates Hughes' role in cultivating this mental instability. Instead, through appropriating myth, Hughes paradoxically states "grave of your risen father – and your own corpse in it". Therefore, 'the minotaur' consolidates a perception that individuals attempt to vindicate and justify their own behavior.

A similar theme also resonates in Frida Kahlo's self-portrait. However, unlike 'The Minotaur', this centers on the vindication of a cultural connection with Mexico. In order to accentuate the validity of traditionalist Mexican values the composer dramatically contrasts images of an organic Mexican landscape thriving with cultural heritage against a materialistic American environment, represented by a proliferation of skyscrapers, pollution and inorganic, industrial shapes in the images background. The use of cultural iconography in the Aztec artifacts furthers this representation by symbolizing the prominence and rich sense of history that is inextricably linked with Mexican civilization. Moreover, the layout lends itself to foregrounding the relative importance of Mexico, where vibrant colours and organic plants exude a rich sense of cultural value. Combined with the juxtaposition against an American culture characterised by commercial interests, notably highlighted in the allusion to Henry Ford, this effectively reinforces the validity of Mexican heritage, in turn justifying Kahlo's affiliation.

Ultimately, the Mexican flag positioned in her left hand elucidates her connection to Mexican culture and the desire to justify this.

Thus, through the shaping of this text it is evident that individuals will continually attempt to vindicate and justify their behavior.

Hughes' confessional poem 'Your Paris' suggests that conflicting perspectives are characterised by selection, omission and emphasis, in turn exemplifying that his relationship with Plath was delineated by turbulence and ambivalence. This poem effectively encapsulates the contrasting perspectives Hughes and his wife have for Paris, which is used to foreground an overall fragmentation in their relationship as a whole. The repetitive juxtaposition of personal pronouns

throughout the poem amplifies the differing perspectives of Hughes and Plath towards Paris and other aspects of life. On a physical level this is reiterated in the diction of Plath's Paris, which is merely reduced to superficiality in its "anecdotal aesthetic", rather than the gratitude Hughes has in the personification of Paris as "a post world war utility survivor". However, Hughes then moves to convey Plath's personality as duplicitous, with her 'practiced lips' making her grotesquely "flayed". Alternatively, the extended analogy of Hughes as a dog conveys that he is also loyal and obedient, aiding his troubled partner, irrespective of whether it is 'hopeless'. This is further reinforced when the composer implies an inherent ambivalence in relationships, where he is bound by a physical connection with "my fingers linked into yours" despite his simultaneous frustration with Plath. Thus, Hughes exonerates himself from a role in Plath's inescapable mental turmoil, instead representing himself as unable to solve the metaphor of Plath's mind as a 'labyrinth'. Consequently, through the shaping of this text, a perception of the highly publicized Hughes-Plath relationship is developed. This suggests that relationships have and will continue to be characterised by turbulence and ambivalence, a theme effectively highlighted through the composer's selection, omission and emphasis of information.

Angela Bennie's media article suggests that conflicting perspectives arise as representation and construction are inherent aspects of humanity. The underlying sense of impartiality in the construction of this media article helps to underpin and consolidate meaning as it postulates on the enigma that is the Hughes-Plath relationship. The accumulation and plethora of conflicting perspectives towards their relationship through references to critics culminates to a point of what Bennie describes as "literary mythology". However, Bennie emphasizes the reasoning behind these perceptions, which in turn provides the responder with clarity in trying to decipher the relationship between representation and meaning. Via exposing the mandate behind feminists who criticized Hughes for constraining Plath's artistic abilities, the responder is then able to see that their perception on this relationship was dictated by their desire to see Plath "shatter the masculine myth of devoted motherhood". The use of simplistic and factual language strengthens the objectivity of the composer, finding balance while also offering a characterization of Hughes as a victim of "Plathian subjectivity". Therefore, through the shaping of this text it is evident that conflicting perspectives arise as the texts are inherently characterised by construction and representation.

Fulbright Scholar's

Hughes's representation of his relationship with Plath suggests that Conflicting perspectives are constructs shaping a way of viewing the world and are characterised by selection, omission and emphasis. FS captures Hughes' ironic and somewhat disingenuous struggle to recollect the first time he was made aware of Plath's existence, through a photograph of the newly arrived scholarship recipients. From the outset the composer employs cumulative rhetorical questions as he attempts to recall 'were you among them? I studied it'. The questioning and speculative tone helps to emphasize the appearance of a valid perspective when in reality his reconstruction of the event is significantly altered by hindsight. This role of hindsight is exemplified during Hughes's highly suggestive and foreshadowing statement, "I was dumfounded afresh by my ignorance of the simplest things' and also through the execution of the pun " with their luggage?" Similarly his emphasis towards Plath's "Veronica lake bang. Not what it hid" illuminates the role of hindsight in diluting memory as it is impossible for Hughes to postulate on Plath's character simply on a superficial aspect such as her hairstyle. Additionally, the repetitive use of personal pronouns, for instance 'I' and "my" and the transition towards higher modality words further stabilizes the positioning of the responder in regard to the credibility of Hughes's perspective and representation of this event. This in turn helps to underpin the extended analogy between Plath's exterior and her deceitful personality. This is captured through the words of "appear blond" and your 'exaggerated American grin', which both effectively connote a representation of Plath as highly duplicitous through the vehicle of the composer's perspective.

The Shot

Hughes' representation of Plath's personality in 'The shot' indicates that Conflicting perspectives arise as individuals attempt to vindicate and justify their own behavior. This is particularly evident in the Shot, which operates as a self-rationalization by Hughes, justifying his inability to help Plath overcome what he represents as her malignant psychological problems. The extended metaphor is of Plath as a bullet shot out of a gun, which instantly exploded and 'ricocheted' towards Hughes after the death of her Father. Instead of the volatility in their relationship being attributed as mutual, Hughes positions the responder to see Plath as a "god-seeker/a god-finder", searching endlessly for someone to bring to into her path of destruction. The repetition of the word 'your' and limited use of self-identifying pronouns accentuates the implication that Plath is solely responsible for the dissolution of their relationship. Through the employment of a strongly accusatory tone, Hughes successfully detaches himself from the causation of Plath's psychological vulnerability. Furthermore, the frenetic pace implied by the bullet, which is 'undeflected... trajectory perfect', magnifies the fact that Hughes cannot see past the smoking gun until "I had been hit". Again, this is indicative of Hughes's authorial intrusion where he is able to neutralize his involvement in the eventual suicide while also explicitly stating that Plath's psychological instability was an endemic issue. Finally, Hughes highlights his inability to save Plath, hypothesizing that "In my position, the right witchdoctor / Might have caught you..." and characterizes himself as an ashamed victim when he admits that "I managed / A wisp of your hair..."

Your Paris

Hughes' representation of an event and personality in 'Your Paris' suggests that Conflicting perspectives are constructs shaping a way of viewing the world and are characterised by selection, omission and emphasis. Hughes's poem 'Your Paris' encapsulates the contrasting perspectives and appreciation he and his wife have for Paris. Through implementing representational and poetic techniques the composer effectively positions the responder to gravitate towards his interpretation of a particular event and personality. The repetitive juxtaposition of personal pronouns "your, you and my, I" in the title and also extended throughout the poem amplifies the differing perspectives of Hughes and Plath towards Paris. In effect this helps to accentuate the idea that Plath is egocentric, monopolizing their relationship. Hence the title 'your Paris', connoting possession and that the city only existed for her, rather than having a life of its own. Similarly, the balance and emphasis on their interpretations is vastly different, which in turn modifies representation. This is reiterated in the diction of Plath's Paris, which is merely reduced to superficiality in its "anecdotal aesthetic", rather than the gratitude Hughes has in the personification of Paris as "a post world war utility survivor".

Furthermore, his emphasis on Plath's personality as duplicitous ('your practiced lips'), and perhaps the omission of her mental instability as the reasoning for this, is again employed to help position the reader to agree that she is indeed 'flayed', despite this implying that she is an inanimate object with grotesque imagery. Alternatively, the extended analogy of Hughes as a dog conveys that he is loyal and obedient, aiding his eternally troubled partner, irrespective of whether it is 'hopelessly'. This is further reinforced where the composer implies the relationship is founded on a physical connection with "my fingers linked into yours", acting as a means to 'protect her'. Exposing that CP can also exist within an individual. Thus, Hughes exonerates himself from a role in Plath's inescapable mental turmoil while also devaluing Plath's perspective of Paris, instead representing himself as an innocent bystander who is unable to solve the metaphor of Plath's mind as a 'labyrinth'.

The Minotaur

The Minotaur captures Hughes' reconstruction of a seemingly innocuous event that acted as a catalyst to the eventual dissolution of their relationship and ultimately also her death. From the outset, the composer employs enjambment and a frenetic pace in describing an argument with his wife that culminates in his mothers 'mahogany table top' being smashed. The personification used for this table, which is hyperbolically "mapped with the scars of my whole life", amplifies its

sentimental value for Hughes. Alternatively, the frantic pace and atmosphere at the beginning of the poem lends itself to the characterization of Plath as highly irrational and emotionally volatile. The positioning of the responder to empathize towards the composer perspective is strengthened in the diction that downplays Hughes' being "twenty minutes late for baby minding". Subsequently this diminishes the credibility of Plath's perspective amidst an event that Hughes' represents as insignificant and overly dramatized. The sarcasm used by Hughes' in retorting to Plath's action instigates a turning point in the poem, which he symbolizes with a goblin contained within her interior, to whom he gives the skein "that unraveled your marriage". Additionally, the metaphor of the labyrinth as a symbol of the mysterious and dangerous psyche of Plath is played out in detail, again stressing Hughes' situation trying to decipher the incomprehensible (reference to myth). The penultimate stanza furthers this representation with cumulative use of the jarring personal pronoun "your" creating an accusatory and bitter tone that sterilizes Hughes' role in cultivating this mental instability. Instead, it is the paradoxical image of her father as the howling Minotaur that results in Hughes' foreshadowing statement "grave of your risen father- and your own corpse in it". In turn, implying that her death resulted from her uncontrollable rage and manic tendencies.

Hughes constructs an image of Plath's descent into isolation, despair and eventual suicide by employing the metaphor of the descent into the Minotaur's lair.

Accusatory tone trivializes mental frailty

Poetic form presents poem through autobiographical material, intimate as BL, which are subjective and personal

Conversational style in poem leads to awareness to engage reader's interest but also very suitable in way that brings memory to consciousness.

Hughes' perspective of Plath is a negative one, and he characterizes her as both superficial with "Your lingo / Always like an emergency burn-off" and self-destructive as a "trajectory perfect" bullet. Hughes accusingly refers to Plath as "you", and utilizes high modality language such as "exaggerated" in "Fulbright Scholars" to convey the negative aspects of her character. In "The Shot", Hughes constructs an image of Plath as irrational and destructive, accusingly asserting that "Your worship needed a god / Where it lacked one, it found one". The conflict between the personal pronouns is perhaps most overt in "Your Paris", where he juxtaposes the concepts of "Your Paris" and "My Paris" to highlight the conflicting perspectives inherent within their relationship and Plath's character. In allowing "your" to dominate the poem, Hughes is perhaps suggesting that Plath monopolized both their Parisian holiday and their relationship. However, through so harshly describing Plath, Hughes to a certain extent alienates the responder. The utilisation of contrasting personal pronouns conveys the alienation between Plath's and Hughes' perspectives, while enforcing his own.

Conflicting perspectives are inherent both within and among the poems of Birthday Letters, as Hughes reflects on his highly controversial relationship with Plath. Highly defensive and accusatory, his position is made more influential by the fact that the deceased Plath is unable to refute his perspective. His 'letters' to her are all the more powerful for their poetic form, which allows them to portray nuanced layers of meaning and emotion in such a way that the responder finds Hughes' philandering less appalling and Plath's actions all the more so. Integral to Hughes' portrayal of his perspective is his narratorial voice, which both conveys and elicits an emotional response to the conflict that exists within and between the poems, and within and between Hughes and Plath.