Perfect Light Study Guide

Perfect Light by Ted Hughes

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Introduction

What astounds many readers about Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* (1998) is the tender, honest, and confessional voice that rises from the poems. Hughes is known for his emotional detachment from the situations about which he wrote, an aloofness of voice that reveals little about his speaker's sentiment and even less about his own. His language is often harsh and explicit in describing violence, whether in the natural world of animals or in human society, and his subjects avoid personal experience, particularly any overt reference to his wife, fellow poet Sylvia Plath. But then he published an entire book written in memory of her.

Birthday Letters includes eighty-eight poems composed over a twenty-five- to thirty-year period, and traces the couple's brief but saturated life together, from the first date and marriage to separation and suicide. Some of the poems are thought to have been inspired by specific letters and photographs of Plath that Hughes rediscovered while preparing her papers for sale to Smith College. "Perfect Light" is one such poem.

Based on a 1962 photo of Plath in a field of daffodils holding their two children, "Perfect Light" describes the physical scene and ends with an ominous metaphor suggesting the mother's inescapable fate. With atypical softness and sentimentality, Hughes addresses Plath directly as the "you" in the poem, portraying her in angelic terms and comparing her innocence to that of the children, before concluding that such a blissful moment was doomed to fade into a "perfect light." *Birthday Letters* is the only collection in which this poem appears.

Author Biography

Ted Hughes was born August 17, 1930, in the village of Mytholmroyd in West Yorkshire, England, but grew up in Mexborough. In school Hughes was encouraged to write poetry by teachers who recognized his talent, and he was later awarded a scholarship to Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he studied English literature. His fascination with animals and their connections to humankind caused him to change his major to anthropology, and after earning his bachelor's degree in 1954, he moved to London to work as a zoo attendant and gardener.

Hughes returned to Cambridge for a master's degree in the late 1950s. He fell in with the literary crowd and published several poems in local journals. At a party he met a young American Fulbright scholar named Sylvia Plath, who was also a poet, and the two were immediately drawn to one another. Within months they were married, so beginning a tumultuous relationship that neither could have anticipated would end in such tragedy.

The couple moved to America in 1957 and both taught at universities in Massachusetts. The same year, Hughes had his first collection of poetry published. In 1959 they moved back to England. They had a daughter in 1960 and a son in 1962, and seemed to live simple, pastoral lives without much money, encouraging one another's poetic efforts and enjoying their children. But a darker side of their marriage came to light when Hughes had an affair with a German woman, Assia Wevill. Plath committed suicide in 1963, a few months after her husband left her.

For years to come, Plath followers blamed Hughes's infidelity for her death, some even attending his readings only to stand up and shout, "Murderer!" when he took the stage. Tragedy struck Hughes again in 1969 when Wevill also committed suicide, adding to the anguish by first killing their two-year-old daughter.

A year later Hughes married again, moving with his wife to a farm in Devon where they raised sheep and cattle. For the next three decades, Hughes wrote prolifically, publishing poetry, drama, literary criticism, and works for children, though he was never able to escape completely his fate as Plath's husband, and worse, as one of the reasons for her death.

Scholars, however, have long recognized Hughes's place as one of England's greatest poets of the twentieth century. He was made poet laureate of Great Britain in 1984, and was a recipient of many literary awards in his long career, including the Guinness Poetry Award in 1958 for *The Hawk in the Rain*, and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1998 for *Birthday Letters*. *Birthday Letters*, which contains the bittersweet poem "Perfect Light," is Hughes's tribute to Plath□to their marriage, their love, their children, and their grievous ending. Only months after publication of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes died of cancer, October 28, 1998, in Devon.

Plot Summary

Line 1

In the first line of "Perfect Light," the speaker establishes the second-person address of the poem, talking directly to a "you" and implying that he is looking at a photograph of the person. Though he does not mention a picture specifically in this line, the phrase "There you are" suggests the premise and the rest of the poem confirms it. This opening line also contains the first use of the word "innocence," which will be used a total of three times and here refers to the innocent appearance of the woman in the photograph.

Lines 2-3

These two lines further establish the setting, explaining that the woman in the picture is "Sitting among [her] daffodils," the latter word another one that will appear repeatedly in the poem□five times to be exact. In line 2, the speaker reveals the picture specifically, suggesting that its subject appears "Posed" for a photograph that should be called " 'Innocence.'" This second use of the word "innocence," coming so quickly after the first one, serves to emphasize the speaker's opinion that the woman is a symbol of purity and childlike naiveté.

Lines 4-5

The phrase "perfect light" is not only the title of the poem, but also appears two times within the poem. In line 4, it refers to the sunlight or daylight that shines on the face of the woman sitting in the field of flowers. The light is "perfect" for picture taking, and the speaker compares the woman's facial features to a daffodil. Line 5 contains the second and third uses of the word "daffodil," which create an ironic twist in the way they are presented with the word "Like." The first phrase□"Like a daffodil"□simply makes the comparison of physical beauty between the woman and the flower. The second phrase□"Like any one of those daffodils" □initially seems to make the same point, to be a repetition of the simile just used. The line immediately following, however, shows that the speaker has something different in mind.

Lines 6-7

The comparison in these lines is between the brief length of time that the ephemeral daffodils will exist in the field and the same short amount of time that the woman will have to live among them. These lines foreshadow her sorrowful fate but still reflect the soft tenderness of the speaker's feelings. Line 7 ends with an introduction of someone or something else in the photograph, something the woman holds in her arms.

Lines 8-10

The second subject in the picture is the woman's "new son," whom she holds "Like a teddy bear" against her. The child is only "a few weeks" old, or a few weeks "into his innocence," and while the third use of the word "innocence" describes the boy, the woman is still portrayed in her own childlike purity, like a little girl holding a teddy bear. The speaker further glorifies the mother and child by comparing them to the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus. Now the woman and her son are not just innocent, but "Holy" as well.

Lines 11-13

These lines introduce the third person in the photograph, the woman's "daughter, barely two," sitting beside her mother and "laughing up" at her. At the end of line 12, the phrase "Like a daffodil" appears to modify the description of the little girl that comes just before it, but not so. The first word in line 13 is "You," meaning the woman, and this is again the person who is compared to the flower. This time her face is like a daffodil's when it turns downward, as she leans over to say something to her daughter.

Line 14

This final line of the first stanza marks a shift in the tone and setting of the poem. Whatever the woman says to her little girl cannot be understood by the speaker, and the camera of course cannot capture it either. The word "lost" is especially significant here in that it describes not only the woman's fate, but also that of the speaker, their marriage, even their love.

Lines 15-17

The gentle tone and pastoral imagery of the first stanza is replaced with a despairing voice and war images in the second stanza. In these first three lines, the speaker describes the hill on which the woman is sitting as a "moated fort hill, bigger than [her] house." A moat is generally constructed to protect a castle from assault, and this image suggests that the woman is in need of protection from something or someone. The "knowledge / Inside the hill" on which she and the children sit refers back to the final lines of the first stanza, in which she bowed her head to speak to her daughter. Whatever her words were, they are now kept secret by the earth that took them in.

Lines 18-20

The phrase "Failed to reach the picture" refers to the "knowledge" in line 15 and reemphasizes the fact that neither the speaker nor the camera knows what the woman said to her daughter. The speaker personifies time with military imagery, saying it comes

toward her "like an infantryman / Returning slowly out of no-man's-land." The location of noman's land is significant because it means the land between two warring parties, suggesting that the woman is caught up in the middle of her own private war, though what its cause is or who the armies are is not revealed.

Lines 21-22

The phrases "Bowed under something" and "never reached you" refer back to the woman's "next moment" in line 18. The notion that her future "never reached" her parallels the previous idea that the knowledge of her words "Failed to reach" or to be captured in the photograph. The final line of the poem again foretells the woman's fate in saying that her next moment "Simply melted into the perfect light." The phrase "perfect light" suggests something darker, something far from perfect.

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Themes

The Brevity of Life

The repetition of the word "daffodils" in "Perfect Light" is more than a technique of style to make the poem cohesive. It is also evidence of the dominant theme that runs through many of the poems in *Birthday Letters*: life is preciously short, and even shorter for those who take their own life. The word appears five times in this poem. Three times the word "daffodils" is used with the word "like" to make a direct comparison between the subject, Plath, and the daffodils. Hughes presents such a powerful, recurrent connection between them that the flowers *become* his ill-fated wife as she becomes them. The basis of this relationship and the glue that holds it together is the brevity of life, both that of the daffodils and Plath's. In a poem called "Daffodils" from this collection, Hughes writes that "We knew we'd live for ever. We had not learned / What a fleeting glance of the everlasting / Daffodils are. . . . the rarest ephemera□ / Our own days!" What a fleeting glance and rare ephemera Plath's life turned out to be. As "Perfect Light" declares, she had but one spring to live among her daffodils, and though the flowers would return the following year, Plath would not.

A theme purporting the shortness of human life may seem too obvious to be of much value, but it is made more complex here because the brevity is helped along by suicide. A poem about the death of an elderly person or someone who is killed or succumbs to disease is certainly worthwhile and not unexpected. But in "Perfect Light," the grim reality of a woman's death by gassing herself in the kitchen oven is remarkably contrasted by the personification of her in tender spring flowers. Hughes had the advantage of writing this poem some years after Plath died; had he written it the same day the photograph was taken, he may have concentrated on the beauty of the daffodils and the serenity of the countryside, comparing only those items to his wife and children. As it was, however, the flowers came to represent something more pressing, something darker in their lives, and Hughes makes that clear through the repetition of one word.

Innocence versus Knowledge

Another compelling theme in this poem is the tension between innocence and knowledge, between the perfect light of blameless simplicity and the perfect light into which knowledge fades, leaving one blind to it. Throughout the entire first stanza, which is nearly twice as long as the second, Hughes stresses over and over again the innocent physical appearance and emotional demeanor of his wife, their children, and the overall setting of the photograph that inspired the work. If the poem ended after line 14, the theme would be only innocence and would conclude with an intriguing yet still expected outcome. But the second stanza presents an about-face, taking place inside the speaker's mind instead of within the setting of the photograph and exploring the effect of knowledge on the naiveté of both the speaker and the woman in the picture.

Knowledge is ironic here; it is both horrible and unattainable. It is horrible for the speaker because he can never know what words of wisdom, or simple, loving platitudes his wife spoke to their daughter as the picture was snapped. Just as sadly, it is unattainable for the woman because she is completely unaware of what her next moment will bring. If there must be a victor in the struggle between innocence and knowledge, Hughes awards the title to the latter, as he expresses by the end of the poem.

The word "innocence" is nowhere to be found in the second stanza. Something quite the opposite now dominates the scene, along with the concept of failure and inability. Neither knowledge nor time can make its destination, and both would-be recipients suffer for it□Plath with her life and Hughes with a lifetime of haunting memories and unanswered questions. The sudden shift from daffodils and teddy bears to an infantryman and no-man's land gives testament to the tormented emotions with which the poet was left after his first wife's suicide. It was also the knowledge that remained, a knowledge that came to dominate so much of Hughes's work, though he managed to conceal its direct source until the publication of *Birthday Letters*.

Style

The style of "Perfect Light" is contemporary free verse, but that does not mean it is totally without any structured format. While the voice is conversational and the language is unadorned, the poem is driven by the force of repetition. This work revolves around three central, repeated words and ideas: the word "daffodil" is mentioned five times, "innocence" is mentioned three times, and the notion of inevitable failure appears twice in the second stanza. The first stanza becomes almost rote with daffodils and innocence, but the technique is very effective in driving home the speaker's frame of mind. He relates both flowers and tender naiveté to every aspect of his subject, and manages to keep the repetition from becoming monotonous by using the repeated words in ironic places. Both "daffodils" and "innocence" are paired with expected and unexpected partners, the daffodils expressing both physical beauty and a short life and innocence, foretelling a haunting, lifelong struggle to understand and overcome past misery.

In the second stanza, the technique of repetition is more somber and concentrates on the frustration of failure. "Failed to reach" and "never reached you" are phrases that are already effective by themselves, but they are made more forceful by appearing only three lines apart. In a relatively short poem, this technique works especially well, and in an otherwise typical free-verse effort, it adds cohesiveness where there may not seem to be any. Beyond the technique of simple repetition, "Perfect Light" is in line with ordinary contemporary free verse, containing no direct rhyme and following no pattern of meter or poetic form.

Historical Context

The premise of "Perfect Light" makes it clear that Hughes based the poem on a photograph taken in 1962, judging from the ages of his children in the picture. When he actually wrote the poem is anyone's guess, as the so-called "Sylvia" poems were written over a twenty-five- to thirty-year period. This particular poem, however, never appeared in any other collections during those decades, as others from *Birthday Letters* did, and may well have been penned later in his career. Hughes's incessant privacy makes it difficult to put an exact date on much of his autobiographical work, and it is unlikely that any social, cultural, or political events of the time had any effect on the poems inspired solely by his relationship with and love for his first wife. Nonetheless, despite his reclusive behavior, Hughes was certainly a citizen of the world while preparing this collection for publication in the 1990s, and that decade brought significant changes to his native Great Britain as it did to many nations across the globe.

From the outset, the British government was undergoing a shake-up as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher resigned in 1990 after her economic policies resulted in decaying inner cities, and her opposition to greater British intervention in Europe caused a revolt within her own Conservative party. The Conservatives, however, managed to hold onto power in the 1992 elections, as John Major came to power, bringing with him more moderate, middle- of-the-road policies than those of his predecessor. A central focus of Major was the ongoing conflict between the government and the Irish Republican Army of Northern Ireland. A peace initiative led to a cease-fire in 1994, but by 1996 renewed violence had erupted again. Peace talks began again in 1997 and within two years both sides had reached an agreement to end direct rule by the British government in Northern Ireland.

The early 1990s also saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and the official end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. These events also had a positive impact on Great Britain, America's staunchest ally, particularly with a greater unification of Europe. But being an ally also meant supporting the United States in a time of war and in 1991, when the Americans bombed Iraq in Operation Desert Storm, the British were there as well.

Another critical development in Great Britain during the 1990s was the nation's participation in the European Union, or EU. While some Britons called for a limited role, others said the country should be vigorously active in the organization, but previous disputes with other member nations did not always make that possible. In 1996 an outbreak of mad cow disease in England worsened relationships when other EU nations banned the import of British beef. By 1999 the ban was lifted when the EU approved Britain's plans for controlling the disease, but France continued its own ban, further straining British-French relations. The two nations experienced an on-again-off-again relationship throughout the decade, with one high point being the completion of the Channel Tunnel project in 1994, which began in France eight years earlier. This tunnel linked England not only to France, but to the entire European mainland.

Still another point of contention in Great Britain was the proliferation of the "Euro" monetary system in the late 1990s, which some European countries embraced immediately and others more reluctantly accepted. A supporter of the new European currency, Labour Party leader Tony Blair became prime minister of Great Britain in 1997. Blair's move to decentralize the government was greatly supported, and Scotland and Wales established their own legislative bodies, giving them a more independent voice in their domestic affairs. Both houses of Parliament also voted to strip most hereditary peers of their right to vote in the House of Lords, a tradition of British government deemed impractical under the Blair administration. The popularity of Blair's government was made evident again a few years later when the Labour Party handed the Conservatives a sound defeat in the 2001 elections.

It is doubtful that the affairs of government or the economy bear any significance on Hughes's "Sylvia" poems, and just as unlikely that any gossip about Royal divorces or marriages, the tragic death of Princess Diana, or the creation of Dolly the cloned sheep in Scotland were any source of inspiration for such personal poetry. And while one can never completely discount the effect of culture or society on any individual, those who maintain a highly private life and derive creativity from within seem less susceptible to either. As poet laureate, Hughes was compelled to meet his public duties, but when it came to Plath, he was definitely one of the private ones.

Critical Overview

Unfortunate for both Hughes and poetry readers in general, the critical reception to his work has often been based more on the man's personal life than on the poet's talent for writing. But Hughes-theogre did not hit the presses until 1963 after Plath's death, meaning that Hughes-the-poet enjoyed at least six years of keen interest, even high praise, for his early poetry. Following the publication of his first collection, revered fellow poet W. S. Merwin lauded the young Hughes's work in "Something of His Own to Say," a 1957 article for the *New York Times Book Review*: "Mr. Hughes has the kind of talent that makes you wonder more than commonly where he will go from here, not because you can't guess but because you venture to hope."

As it turns out, it really was not possible to guess, for after the highly publicized scandal regarding Hughes's unfaithfulness to Plath and her subsequent suicide, many critics and scholars began reading his work more to find hidden references to the tragic marriage and violent ending than for mere poetic creativity. Those critics who did concentrate on the poems themselves highlighted the overuse of violent animal imagery, dark settings, and bleak themes, usually considering the vehemence and gloominess a reflection of the poet's personality. Nonetheless, Hughes's raw gift for poetry did not go unrecognized by British literati, and he was made poet laureate of the nation and awarded several prestigious awards over the years, despite the personal controversy.

After the publication of *New Selected Poems, 1957-1994*, a shift in criticism began. Hughes was finally recognized for having a side□a tender, reflective, loving side□that the public had not seen before. Writing a review of this collection for *World Literature Today*, critic Peter Firchow observes about the sixteen "Sylvia" poems in the "Uncollected" section at the end of the book: "Hughes had never before permitted so intimate a poetic glimpse into this much-excavated-and-speculatedabout patch of his life. . . . [These poems] are by themselves worth the price of the entire collection."

In an article called "Owning the Facts of His Life: Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*," from the *Literary Review*, critic Carol Bere writes, "While there is little question that much of the impact of poems turns on the immediacy of biography . . . this should not override the realization that *Birthday Letters* is a major work of poetry by Hughes, containing some of the most visceral, accessible writing that he has produced to date." Hughes would enjoy this kind of criticism only a few short months before his death, but perhaps the praise was at least a small satisfaction for him, even if it came much too late.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill addresses the turnaround in scholarly opinion on Hughes's personality after the publication of his last collection of poetry.

Now that both Plath and Hughes are dead, more fair and equitable analyses of their tragic relationship is being written than was ever afforded them while alive. This is especially true for Hughes, of course, who spent the last thirty-five years of his life fending off scornful reports of his marital infidelity and evading accusations of near-murder in Plath's death. Truly, he did not help himself much by refusing to be interviewed about the entire affair or about his reaction to the suicide and by having the gall to edit Plath's poetry and fiction, burn one of her journals, and limit access to all of it. Some say those were grounds enough to brand him an arrogant rogue and coldhearted brute for life. Perhaps Hughes's stony silence on this terrible episode was not an attempt to conceal how little he cared but, rather, how much he grieved. Perhaps his inhospitable aloofness was really painful insecurity. Maybe he loved his wife more than the world had a right to know.

Emory University in Atlanta now houses the two-and-a-half ton Hughes collection of manuscripts, journals, and letters acquired about a year before the poet's death. Opened exclusively to scholars in 1999, the archive has proven to be an eye-opener for those privileged to have seen the material that comprises it. In an article for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* titled "In a New Light," journalist Bo Emerson writes about the scholars' reactions, saying, "Their early verdict: Hughes is a different man and a different poet than we knew." One visiting researcher, poet Carolyn Wright (quoted in Emerson), notes that the writings present "a consistent voice, the voice of a man who is deeply, deeply marked by this violent death of this woman he loved so much." Summing up the previously undisclosed material most poignantly, Emerson asserts that "*Birthday Letters* was, in a way, the interview that Hughes never gave." From that final collection, the poem "Perfect Light" is an apt representative of what the poet may have felt in his heart but refused to speak with his tongue.

The primary evidence that "Perfect Light" was written with honesty and openness is that the subject of the poem is addressed directly. Hughes did not attempt to evade forthright expression by using a more distant third-person "she" or hiding behind any ambiguity in who the person he is speaking to really is. "There *you* are" (italics mine) starts this poem off with unmistakable candor from the speaker to Plath, essentially leaving the reader on the sidelines to be a mere observer of or eavesdropper on an intensely personal utterance. And consider this: *nineteen times* in this brief poem Hughes uses the word "you" or "your." Nineteen times in twenty-two lines he directly addresses his dead wife, creating such a compact, feverish attempt to communicate his feelings about her, for her, and to her that it seems almost overkill. Almost, but not quite. Here, what may appear to be exaggeration and overuse of a technique is really something as simple and honest as desperation. Repeating "you" and "your" over and over is the

method of a man compelled to get his message across, not to the world, but to the only one who matters to him, dead or alive.

The first stanza of "Perfect Light" in particular is loaded with repeating words, and both "innocence" and "daffodils" embrace a tender affection and sweet lovingness that seem so unlikely coming from Hughes. How odd for a husband accused of driving his wife to suicide to compare her beauty to a flower, her gentleness to that of a child holding a teddy bear. This suspected lout even goes so far as to liken Plath to the mother of Jesus and to portray the entire family setting as not only pastoral and comforting, but supernatural and holy. The first fourteen lines of this poem are so saturated with sweetness that they beg for a touch of bitterness, or at least a good reason for their candy coating. And Hughes does not disappoint. Ironically, as sappy and sentimental as the first stanza is, it in no way can overshadow the brutal reality of grief and sorrow that permeates the second. Yet the poet does not lose his tenderness in the last eight lines, only the premise in which it exists.

If a sunlit field of daffodils and Plath's innocent appearance early on represent the youthful, sincere love of a young married couple, then the "moated fort hill" and infantryman returning from no-man's land later must symbolize the vulnerability and grief of the one left behind. But even in the midst of such harsh military verbiage, the tone is still soft, the voice still placid. Hughes turns to images of violence because he *must* in order to keep the poem honest. Plath may have died peacefully in her sleep when her lungs filled with gas from the oven, but the circumstances of such a demise are truly horrible. When one considers the entire situation, all of it reeks of violence and misery and pain. Like war. These images in the second stanza suggest a sudden and complete turnaround in the emotions of both Plath and Hughes, a change that neither could foresee nor, more sadly, prevent.

The sentiment of "Perfect Light" is not that of a man who had no feelings for his wife while she was alive and certainly not that of one who was unaffected by her death. While Plath fans were busy shouting down Hughes at his own poetry readings and chiseling his name off their heroine's tombstone, no one really knew what was going on inside the very private, estranged husband whose feelings must have run the gamut from guilt to exoneration, anger to grief. Still other more sober, nonjudgmental readers and critics allowed Hughes the benefit of the doubt, at least in order to give the poet a fair chance to live his own life and create his own work, which was admittedly some of the best poetry of the time. It was as though they were willing to accept the fact that only Hughes would ever be the one to know how he really felt about Plath's suicide and public opinion did not matter. In the same vein, the "knowledge / Inside the hill" on which Plath was sitting in the "Perfect Light" photograph would forever be lost to Hughes who could not hear what words his wife had spoken to their daughter when the picture was taken. Most likely they were only benign phrases of love from a mother to a daughter, but casting them off misses the point. What Hughes will really never know is why she did it. In spite of his obvious infidelity, in spite of the trouble between them, in spite of any painful influence his leaving had on her, why did she take her own life?

This is undoubtedly a difficult question to answer regarding anyone who chooses suicide as a way out. First, one must ask, "A way out of *what*?" In Plath's case, many of her friends, mourners, and fans were quick to answer, "A life made miserable by her lousy husband." But how can one individual truly force such a final, self-imposed sentence on someone else, especially when that someone is a young mother with two beautiful children who surely adore her? The fact is Plath had problems long before she met Hughes. Her journals and her poems reflect a less-than-perfect childhood and a volatile relationship with both parents. Her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* portrays the life of an emotionally unstable young woman bent on self-destruction. And most importantly, at least in Hughes's defense, she had already attempted suicide in the early 1950s□years before ever meeting the young British poet. This, of course, is not to detract from the sorrowful fact of Plath's death nor to sympathize with an unfaithful husband who surely could have handled his personal life with less selfishness and more consideration of how his behavior would affect others. But to place wholesale blame on Hughes for his wife's suicide seems, at best, a reactionary move on the part of shocked and misinformed groupies, and, at worst, a pathetic attempt to further the cause of feminism by glamorizing the suicide and acting as judge and jury to publicly convict the "guilty." After *Birthday Letters*, some members of the jury have rescinded their verdict.

In the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article, Emerson contends that "Through it all, Hughes refused to explain himself or to be interviewed about Plath." It was likely this profound obstinacy that fed much of the accusatory outcry from a public already hungry for the juicy details. But would the condemned poet have been able to appease angry Plath supporters by laying open his heart on the matter? Would they have had sympathy for a thoughtless scoundrel who walked out on his wife and children for another woman if he had gone before a microphone and confessed his true love for the one he abandoned? Not likely. Hughes had every right and every reason to keep his private thoughts private, his personal grief personal. In the end, though, he came forward to let the world know that he did indeed love Plath and that he did indeed mourn her loss.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Perfect Light," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Moran is a teacher of English and American literature. In this essay, Moran examines the ways in which Hughes's poem evokes a sense of "double time" in the viewer.

The literary and the visual arts are very similar. Each strives to capture a moment, tell a story or pin down something that would otherwise be lost in the flow of time. When a writer composes a piece of written work about a piece of visual art, neither of the original pieces remain unchanged: the written work affects how one views the visual and the visual work informs the way a reader approaches the written. Understanding this relationship is key to understanding Hughes's "Perfect Light" and its issues.

An historical example of this relationship between the visual and literary arts will suggest, by analogy, what happens to any reader of "Perfect Light" who knows the basic story of Sylvia Plath. In 1555, Pieter Brueghel painted "The Fall of Icarus," a work depicting the mythological character who flew too close to the sun on his man-made wings. The painting shows Icarus plummeting into the sea□but doing so far in the background. The foreground features scenes from the daily grind of peasant life: plowing and shepherding are given much more space on the canvas than Icarus, who is a mere speck near the horizon. Almost four-hundred years later (in 1938), W. H. Auden published "Musee de Beaux Arts," a poetic appreciation of Brueghel's painting and an insight into the vanity of human literal (and figurative) attempts at flight. The lines in which Auden praises the old masters (like Brueghel) because they "never forgot" that "dreadful martyrdom must run its course" in a "corner" or "some untidy spot" offer a critical commentary on the painting; they also, however, affect the way that any viewer of the painting will re-examine it. Reading Auden's poem affects the way a viewer sees Breughel's painting and, of course, looking at Breughel's painting will affect the way a reader understands Auden's poem. "The Fall of Icarus" and "Musee de Beaux Arts" exist independently from each other, yet they are welded together in a kind of artistic Gestalt.

Ted Hughes's "Perfect Light" works in much the same way as Auden's poem: it is the speaker's reaction to a work of visual art (in this case, a photograph) that changes the way the reader looks at and understands the work being described.

But what exactly changes? How does this change occur? A simple experiment will illustrate the change in a less profound but more immediate way: show anyone the photograph of Plath and her children on which the poem is based but do not identify the people in it. What does the unassuming viewer see? A woman, thirty or so, sitting in a field with two children (presumably her own). She is smiling at one of them, a girl; with her left arm she cradles an infant. The setting is pastoral; the daffodils in the foreground and held in the little girl's hand are in tune with the mood of the photograph. It is a picture of motherhood, of a quiet day in the country□or of "innocence," as Hughes labels it.

Now, tell the person to whom you have shown the photograph that the woman is Sylvia Plath, the poet who would commit suicide less than a year after the photograph was taken. Everything changes. Her smile becomes more complex. The children become objects of pathos rather than only "cute kids." All of the ideas a viewer had about the photograph are exploded. The daffodils, once finishing touches on a bucolic scene, become ironic commentators on the people they surround; the viewer searches for clues or some indication in the photograph that suggests Plath's later fate.

The photograph has not changed, but the viewer has. What brought about this change? Knowledge. The discovery that the smiling woman in the photograph is dead and died at her own hand. The meanings of words and images are ambiguous and complex enough, but they become even more complex and ambiguous in the flow of time. This is not to suggest that a modern viewer's ideas about the photograph are more profound or complex, instead, they have been informed and shaped by the knowledge brought with time. Shakespeare's rousing play about Henry V conquering France meant one thing in 1599 and quite another in 1944, when England was in the throes of World War II.

"Perfect Light" works by evoking this sense of "double time," the sense that there are, in a way, two "versions" of the photograph. First, there is a kind of prelapsarian one in which Plath and her children seem posed "as in a picture" titled "Innocence," and a kind of postlapsarian version in which the viewer's knowledge of good and evil (and suicide) make Plath's smile more enigmatic. Knowledge is power, but it also pulls one out of paradise, in this case, the paradise of innocence where there is no suicide or torrent of emotions that need to be sorted out in verse.

The poem begins by addressing Plath directly: "There you are, in all your innocence, / Sitting among your daffodils, as in a picture / Posed as for the title: 'Innocence.'" To an innocent observer who had never heard of Sylvia Plath, Hughes's description would seem an apt one, but those who know her fate cannot be so comfortable. Plath *seems* posed "as in a picture" titled "Innocence," but she is not. Instead, she is posed for a picture with a much different and unspoken title, a title that would (if one could) encapsulate all of the contrary emotions felt by Hughes while viewing this photograph. The only way in which the photograph could be titled "Innocence" would be if the person bestowing the title were wholly unaware of its subject's tragic end. Yet, Plath's own innocence of what would be her fate can still be perceived by Hughes and it is his perception of this innocence that he tries to convey to the reader.

The daffodils and "perfect light" of the title are similarly viewed as both innocent and ironic. Plath is, in one sense, like the daffodils surrounding her: beautiful and positioned so as to catch the rays of the sun just so. The light illuminates Plath's face "like a daffodil" while Plath turns her face to her daughter in the posture of a daffodil. However, such comparisons also invite another, more sobering one: "Like any of those daffodils / It was to be your only April on earth / Among your daffodils." As Robert Frost remarked, "Nothing gold can stay," and the thoughts of the natural death of the daffodils in the photograph serve as a reminder of the unnatural death of Plath. On one level, the April referred to here is the April of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a time of life and growth ("that Aprill, with his shoures soote"), but in another sense it is the April of Eliot's *The*

Waste Land ("April is the cruelest month"). Both Aprils are present, in the photograph and the poem, simultaneously.

As Hughes's eye scans the photograph, it finds other details that suggest a longed-for (yet impossible to attain) prelapsarian view. Her "new son" is "Like a teddy bear" and "only a few weeks into his innocence"; he and Plath seem the epitome of "Mother and infant, as in the Holy portrait." The infant Jesus is, of course, a symbol of innocence, yet one is also reminded of another time in which the Virgin Mary held her son: the Pieta. Any depiction of the infant Jesus brings with it the knowledge of his ultimate fate on the cross, just as any photograph of Sylvia Plath brings with it the knowledge of her suicide.

The stanza break signifies the moment in Hughes's apprehension of the photograph when he deals directly with the fact that he is looking at a soon-to-be suicide: the "knowledge" that she would kill herself is "Inside the hill" on which she is posed. The landscape itself seems pregnant with meaning. Hughes remarks that this knowledge "Failed to reach the picture," but this is only true in one sense. While Plath is innocent of the knowledge of what she will do to herself, Hughes (and, by extension, any informed viewer) is not. The hill is compared to a "moated fort hill" to make it seem like a bastion of innocence, a place protected from the knowledge that time will bring. This knowledge, however, is "Inside the hill"□in other words, the very thing against which this bastion of innocence is supposed to stand has already corrupted it. One cannot pretend that the knowledge of Plath's suicide is not there. Thus, Plath's "next moment," a moment that would both disrupt the "perfect light" and bring her closer to her suicide, was "coming towards" her "like an infantryman / Returning slowly out of no-man's-land"□but never "reached" her. In other words, the moment is static, frozen in time by the photograph, and in that frozen moment, the violence that the "infantryman" time would bring to her is no match for the power of her innocence. Therefore, it "Simply melted into the perfect light." The poet thus stands in awe of Plath's innocence while simultaneously struggling with the knowledge that longs to assault such innocence. One cannot avoid the knowledge brought about by time, nor can one pretend that such knowledge does not affect one's perceptions of the past. Before Plath's suicide, the "perfect light" is that of perfect innocence; today, the light seen in that photograph is painful and ironic.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "Perfect Light," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

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Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Bundtzen examines Hughes's Birthday Letters *within the context of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to reveal Hughes's feelings about his deceased wife, poet Sylvia Plath.*

The task is now carried through bit by bit . . . while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind. Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up . . . and the detachment of the libido from accomplished. Why this process of carrying out the behest of reality bit by bit . . . should be so extraordinarily painful is not at all easy to explain . . . The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.

I see you there, clearer, more real
Than in any of the years in its shadow
As if I saw you that once, then never again.

Reviewers of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* have understandably been absorbed with biographical issues. Addressed to his American poet-wife Sylvia Plath thirty-five years after her death, these verse-letters hold the promise of providing answers to the many questions that biographers and critics have asked about the circumstances of their marriage, his desertion of her and their children for another woman in October 1962, and her suicide on 11 February 1963. Why, after a prolonged and obdurate silence about these matters has Hughes suddenly decided to tell what is presumably his side of the storywhat A. Alvarez calls "scenes from a marriage, Hughes's take on the life they shared?" Are the poems, as Jacqueline Rose suggests, "calling for a response. Of understanding? Of sympathy?" and assuredly not from Plath, but more likely, from her readers and admirers who have found his silence "another sign of callousness" and his handling of her estatethe writing which she left unpublished when she committed suicide in 1963 highly suspect. His editing of her journals, his reconstruction of her *Ariel* volume, and his infamous disclosures about losing or destroying her final journals and an unfinished novel have all been seen as self-serving in one way or another. For many critics, Hughes censored those parts of Plath's journals which implicate him as a domineering husband; he mutilated her artistic intentions in *Ariel* to obscure his role as a villain in its poetic narrative; he destroyed valuable information about her final months in the journal which he burned; and he carelessly lost another journal and an unfinished novel because these works accuse him, point to him as the unfaithful one, the philandering and unfeeling husband. Are Hughes's *Birthday Letters* a confession? an apology? a catharsis? Do they provide information about Plath's final months and days? These are the questions initially raised in critical responses to their publication.

Symptomatic of reviewers' preoccupation with biographical accuracy is Katha Pollitt's description of the dilemma for Hughes's readers: "Inevitably, given the claims that these poems set the record straight, the question of truth arises." And Pollitt, with several other reviewers, is not convinced that Hughes is capable of objectivity and impartiality,

or even of a modest and limited personal truth, especially not over the stretch of eighty-eight poems and two hundred pages of verse:

that intimate voice . . . is overwhelmed by others: ranting,
self-justifying, rambling, flaccid, bombastic. Incident
after incident makes the same point: she was
the sick one, I was the "nurse and protector." I didn't
kill her□poetry, Fate, her obsession with her dead
father killed her. The more Hughes insists on his own
good intentions and the inevitability of Plath's suicide,
the less convincing he becomes.

In a blistering review for the *New Republic* titled "Muck Funnel," James Wood likewise denounces *Birthday Letters* as boringly repetitious minor tantrums: "His poems are little epidemics of blame" that endlessly rebuke the dead Plath and her poems, and its "like listening to one half of a telephone call." The other side of the conversation is missing.

Even when a reviewer offers a more positive view of *Birthday Letters* as poetry rather than biographical evidence, as in Jack Kroll's praise of Hughes's "masterly arsenal of forms, rhythms and images," the laurel is quickly withdrawn because Hughes has not been as "merciless to himself" as he should have, has not submitted himself to the "deep self-examination" which would have provided answers to biographers who want to know, "Why did he leave? And what happened to drive Assia [Wevill, the other woman in the love triangle with his wife] to exactly the same self-destruction as Plath?" Similarly, even as Jacqueline Rose forgives the portent-laden plot of *Birthday Letters* that other reviewers have derided as evasive and "borrowed from the most familiar dirty magics," she reminds her reader of her own and other feminists' famous battles with Hughes and his sister, Olwyn, over interpreting Plath's work. She ends her review by asking him to end this feud with Plath's partisan women readers and to retract his wrong-headed and self-righteous "caricature" of feminists in *Birthday Letters* as, for example, hyenas feeding on Plath's corpse in "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother."

As all this suggests, *Birthday Letters* has received very little interpretation based primarily on its literary values. He is a husband addressing his tragically dead wife, and this is why we have come to eavesdrop□to discover whether he wants belatedly to share his guilt for her suicide or to offer intimate glimpses into what seemed to be a closed chapter in his life. As Pollitt notes, "The storm of publicity surrounding *Birthday Letters* has turned into a kind of marital spin contest, an episode in the larger war between the sexes"; A. Alvarez complains that the volume is on the best-seller list " 'for all the wrong reasons. It's the Oprah Winfrey element.' " Critics do not wish to interpret the poetry so much as inquiring minds want to know all the gruesome and scandalous details.

Hughes's letters, however, are not simply the utterances of a bereaved husband invoking the haunting presence of a beloved spouse, but also poems addressed by one poet to another. In "Sam," for example, Hughes speculates that when Plath survived a ride on a runaway horse, it was the genius of poetry that saved her:

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What saved you? Maybe your poems
Saved themselves, slung under that plunging neck,
Hammocked in your body over the switchback road.

The poems which she wrote in her final months, Hughes suggests here, needed her to live long enough for them to be written, and by saving her, "saved themselves" from oblivion. She "couldn't have done it. / Something in you not you did it for itself." "It" was poetic destiny at work. Similarly, in "Flounders," he claims, "we / Only did what poetry told us to do," as if their lives were predetermined and their agency governed entirely by the Muse of their poetic marriage. Such assertions have no claim to factual truth, and, indeed, have been castigated as strategies for "fate playing"manipulations by Hughes throughout *Birthday Letters* to escape responsibility and culpability for what happened in his marriage to Plath.

An alternative critical strategy begins by simply acknowledging the fictive nature of such assertions and then looks for a consistent patterning of poetic statements that offers an invented truth about what happened in their marriage. Hughes's "birthday letters" are embedded with myth, superstition, and folklore, with references to other poems, many of them by Plath, and they display an inordinate degree of literary self-consciousness. Further, when Hughes is not borrowing titles directly from Plath's poemsfor example, "The Rabbit Catcher," "Totem," "Apprehensions"he is engaging his wife's preoccupations with honeybees and Otto Plath, with the figure of Ariel and the other dramatis personae from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and with Plath's overarching themes of death and rebirth, mourning and melancholia. *Birthday Letters* are both companion poems and adversarial poems, in conversation and argument with Plath as a fellow poet of grief and as the irretrievable wife, Eurydice, to Hughes's Orpheus.

. . . the lire you begged / To be given again, you would
never recover, ever.

Throughout *Birthday Letters,* there is an implicit analogy between Hughes and Orpheus as the poet who mourns for his lost wife Plath-Eurydice, who repeatedly fails to retrieve her from "Inside that numbness of the earth / [for] Our future trying to happen," and who eventually challenges Plath's grieving verse with his own poetry of loss. By opposing her, he also releases himself from the melancholic and doomed poetic identity of Orpheus to complete a normal mourning process, simultaneously bidding final farewell to his dead wife. In "A Picture of Otto," one of the final "letters," Hughes gives Plath back to her father, thereby lifting the mask that Plath imposed on him in her verse, in which the "ghost" of Otto Plath is

. . . inseparable from my shadow
As long as your daughter's words tan stir a candle.
She could hardly tell us apart in the end.

At least one of Hughes's motives for writing *Birthday Letters* is to "tell" himself "apart" from Otto Plath in his poetic version of their marriage. Instead of joining his dead wife in

the underworld, as Orpheus joins Eurydice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hughes descends to make peace with Otto Plath, meeting him "face to face in the dark adit / Where I have come looking for your daughter." The ghost of Orpheus in Ovid

. . . found Eurydice
And took her in his arms with leaping heart.
There hand in hand they stroll, the two together;
Sometimes he follows as she walks in front,
Sometimes he goes ahead and gazes back—No
danger now—at his Eurydice.

The figure of Otto Plath, however, stands between Hughes and Plath, making such a reunion impossible, except on Plath's poetic terms, which deny Hughes an identity separate from her father. What Hughes has come to understand and accept is that she will always be her father's daughter:

. . . you [Otto Plath] never could have released her.
I was a whole myth too late to replace you.
This underworld, my friend, is her heart's home.
Inseparable, here we must remain.

Everything forgiven and in common—

To hold his wife "in common" with her father is the fate that Plath's verse imposes on Hughes. Hughes's final line in "A Picture of Otto" compares the dead Plath with Wilfrid Owen in Owen's poem, "Strange Meeting," like Owen "Sleeping with his German as if alone." Plath, too, sleeps with her German father—her only company the supposed enemy whom she kills in her verse. The cold comfort of her poetic immortality is an eternity "as if alone" with presences she herself created for imaginary battles. As Owen is forever identified as the poet who died too young, a casualty of the Germans in World War I, so Plath is remembered as another poet who died too young, a casualty of her own obsession with the German daddy, Otto Plath.

Two Classical texts interwoven within the narrative of *Birthday Letters* further suggest that Hughes has appropriated an Orpheus-like identity for himself: these are the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid and *Book 4* of Virgil's *Georgics.* Hughes does not translate Ovid's version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth for his own 1997 *Tales from Ovid*, but the elaborate narrative in *Birthday Letters* often seems ruled by mythic powers of transformation, inspired by an Ovidian "ether" invoked by the poet Hughes to explain his wife's poetic immortality. Even Plath's face is described in "18 Rugby Street" as continually metamorphosing, a shapeshifting shell for the restless spirit inside:

A device for elastic extremes,
A spirit mask transfigured every moment
In its own seance, its own ether.

Plath's face is elementally protean—"a stage / For weathers and currents, the sun's play and the moon's"—and does not assume its final mask, "the face of a child—its scar / Like a Maker's flaw," until her death, "that final morning."

In the glossary for Hughes's *Tales,* Orpheus is described as the "Thracian bard, whose music could rouse emotion in wild beasts, trees and mountains; son of the Muse Calliope by either Apollo or Oeagrus, a king of Thrace, husband of Eurydice; after her death he wandered through the mountains of Thrace, playing his lyre." The wildness associated with Thrace has a parallel in the rough countryside and moors of Yorkshire, just as Orpheus' musical affinity for animals and nature may recall Yorkshire's native son, Hughes, also a poet of nature. In "The Owl," a "letter" remembering an early episode in his marriage to Plath, Hughes fascinates her with his Orpheus-like gifts: he rouses a predatory owl to swoop down on him by sucking "the throaty thin woe of a rabbit / Out of my wetted knuckle." Perhaps like Orpheus wooing Eurydice, Hughes "made my world perform its utmost for you."

Finally, while Hughes does not appropriate Ovid's framing narrative (Book X of the *Metamorphoses* opens with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and ends, as we move into Book XI, with the story of Orpheus' death), he does rework the Thracian bard's longer tales as they appear in Ovid: the stories of Pygmalion, Myrrha, Venus and Adonis, and Atlanta also form a group in Hughes's *Tales from Ovid.* The story of Myrrha's attempted suicide and incestuous affair with her father, Cinyras, is especially pertinent to Hughes's understanding of Plath's suicide and her incestuous love for her father, Otto Plath. Myrrha's metamorphosis into a tree, a weeping myrrh, converges with Hughes's response to Plath's poem, "Elm" in which she assumes the voice of the tree in order to give figurative expression to her experience with shock treatments:

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Her anxiety "petrifies the will": "I am terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in me." Akin to Hughes's narration of the birth of Adonis from the bole of his tree-mother Myrrha—"It heaves to rive a way out of its mother"—is his description of Plath's giving birth to Ariel's voice out of the process of composing "Elm": "the voice of Ariel emerges, fully-fledged, as a bird, 'a cry'":

Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

Like Hughes's Adonis in the *Tales,* conceived by Myrrha after spending several nights with her father, Cinyras, Plath's Ariel-persona is, in his interpretation, the fruit of an incestuous bonding with her father in a classical underworld, followed by a strange metamorphosis:

. . . between the second of April [1962], when she entered
her father's coffin under the Yew Tree [in the

poem "Little Fugue"], and the nineteenth when she
emerged as a terrible bird of love up through the "taproot"
of the Elm Tree, she has made a journey of selftransformation
from the Tree in the West to the Tree
in the East. From a tree atone of the gates of the underworld
in the sunset to a tree at another of the gates
of the underworld in the dawn. As if she had travelled
underground, like the sun in the night, from one
to the other.

Hughes further describes this transformative journey by Plath as "the bereft love returning to life," as if Plath had revivified her dead father, but only by disinterring an erotic attachment that leads inevitably to her own suffering and sacrifice. As Hughes understands Plath's plight in "Elm," "The unalterable truth to this reality is the voice's deeper negative story. It explains why the bird in the Elm 'terrified' her with its 'malignity.'" Perhaps this also explains why Hughes's own mourning poems for Plath will enact a counter-ritual for expressing grief, at times anti-Ovidian in their handling of metamorphosis.

Another influence on Hughes's *Birthday Letters* may be Book 4 of Virgil's *Georgics*, a text commonly read by English schoolboys of his generation and one that specifically intertwines the craft of beekeeping with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Here Virgil implicates Aristaeus, the classical patron of bees and beekeeping, in Orpheus' loss of Eurydice. As Hughes, in "The Bee God" and several other poems, blames Plath's father, Otto, the entomologist and expert on bees, for taking his wife away from him, so in the Georgics Orpheus' wrath is directed at the shepherd Aristaeus, whose lusty pursuit of Eurydice inadvertently causes her death. Aristaeus is punished when he loses all of his bees through famine and disease. Baffled at his misfortune, Aristaeus seeks oracular advice from Proteus, who explains why he has suffered this loss:

"The anger that pursues you is divine,
Grievous the sin you pay for. Piteous Orpheus
It is that seeks to invoke this penalty
Against you□did the Fates not interpose□
Far less than you deserve, for bitter anguish
At the sundering of his wife. You were the cause:
To escape from your embrace across a stream
Headlong she fled, nor did the poor doomed girl
Notice before her feet, deep in the grass,
The watcher on the bank, a monstrous serpent."

Aristaeus is advised by Proteus to make a sacrifice to " 'The nymphs with whom [Eurydice] used to dance her rounds,'" who sent "'this wretched blight'" on his bees. From the "putrid flesh" of a bull which Aristaeus batters with a mallet until dead, a swarm of bees emerges to refurbish the ravaged hives of Aristaeus. Sacrifice reverses his misfortune and renews the life of his hives. Hughes reiterates this configuration of symbols and characters in *Birthday Letters,* adding to it an incestuous bond between

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Plath/Eurydice and Otto Plath/Aristaeus. Like Orpheus, the poet-husband must contend with another maestro of bees, who comes between him and his youthful wife, as well as with a "monstrous serpent" that appears as a "great snake" and "a mamba, fatal" at their marriage ceremony in "The Rag Rug." In other poems, Otto Plath is a roaring minotaur, recalling the bull sacrificed by Aristaeus to renew his beehives. Otto Plath is also a "German cuckoo," like the bird which usurps another's nest to lay the egg that will hatch into the voice of Ariel□"fully-fledged, as a bird," or, as Hughes goes on to describe the father who cuckolds him in "The Table," "While I slept he snuggled / Shivering between us," a cold dead figure who robs their marriage bed of warmth and Hughes of his wife's body. Finally, in "Fairy Tale," he is an "Ogre" and once again Plath is a fledgling who "died each night to be with him, / As if you flew off into death."

Throughout *Birthday Letters,* Hughes reiterates and refashions the Virgilian theme of sacrifice to placate and appease. The figure of Orpheus- Hughes, however, stands in stark contrast to Aristaeus, to Plath's poetry of sacrifice, to her father's portrayal as a bellowing minotaur demanding human victims, and, finally, to the women who advised Plath in her final days□like the nymphs who were Eurydice's friends and wanted Aristaeus to be punished. Whereas for all of these figures in Hughes's narrative, sacrifice is a form of reparation □even an exchange of death for new life□Orpheus-Hughes's loss is depicted as irreparable, his grief implacable, and his longing unappeased by sacrifice. Only through the historical process of remembering important moments in their marriage and then permitting them to fade does *Birthday Letters* complete the process of healing grief.

Step for step / I walked in the sleep / You tried to
wake from.

The early poems in *Birthday Letters,* even as they move forward temporally□love at first sight, a whirlwind courtship, marriage, and honeymoon□ are also frequently embedded both with narrative strands belonging to the Orpheus-Eurydice myth and freeze-frames or snapshots arresting motion and reminding readers of Orpheus' final, impulsive gaze at Eurydice. Memory and loss are conceived of as moments of backward-looking, briefly and stunningly vivid, then fading. Hence, in "St. Botolph's," Hughes remembers their first meeting:

. . . □suddenly you.
First sight. First snapshot isolated
Unalterable, stilled in the camera's glare.

Almost immediately, however, Hughes leaps forward to the "years in its shadow□ / As if I saw you that once, then never again," in which "its shadow" must be her death, the darkness that enfolds his "clearer, more real" poetic imagining of his first sight of her. As with so many moments of Plath's evocation in *Birthday Letters,* Hughes works with paradox, with absence that is palpable, with a "once" that is so real that its "never again" seems impossible□as impossible to accept as Orpheus' loss of Eurydice.

Another early "letter," "Carytids (I)," plays with the frozen animation of Greek statuary□the young virgins who are simultaneously supporting columns. Hughes is also looking backward at the first poem by Plath which he read, in which these maidens make their appearance. Because he "disliked" the poem "through the eyes of a stranger," he "missed everything" that he now recognizes he was meant to see. He foolishly

. . . made nothing
Of that massive, starless, mid-fall, falling
Heaven of granite

stopped, as if in a snapshot,
By their hair.

In these artificed maids, he might have discerned the ghostly aura of his future wife, "Fragile, like the mantle of a gas-lamp," where "mantle" alludes to the caryatids' streaming hair as an architectural framing support, and also to the mantle of a gas lamp, a mesh bag that holds the burning gas of a gas lamp, yet instantly crumbles to powdery ash at the slightest touch. With his friends, too "careles / Of grave life," he saw "No stirring / Of omen" in the "Heaven of granite" held up by such "friable" creatures: a forewarning of the terrible fate also awaiting Plath. The pun in "grave life" alludes simultaneously to Plath's extraordinary posthumous life, the poetic immortality which Hughes has taken care of, and also to the seriousness and preciousness of life and the carelessnes of youth about it. Neither Orpheus nor Hughes anticipated how brief their marriages would be.

"Fate Playing" deals with an incident in Hughes's courtship of Plath□a planned rendezvous in London that almost went awry□and may also be read as a warning. The poem ominously enacts a version of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth. Fate disguises its oracular content by playfully reversing the roles of Hughes and Plath. As he emerges from a train at King's Cross, it is as if he has been pulled out of a dark underworld by the force of his wife's desire, suggested by Hughes's repeated use of "molten" to describe the intensity of Plath's inner fire. On their wedding day, he will see her "Wrestling to contain your flames," and here, in "the flow of released passengers," he sees her

. . . molten face, your molten eyes
And your exclamations, your flinging arms
Your scattering tears
As if I had come back from the dead
Against every possibility, against
Every negative but your own prayer
To your own gods.

Even the taxi she has hired is a "chariot" driven by a "small god," and her "frenzied chariot-ride" may recall Persephone's kidnapping by Hades in a wagon, her descent as

a young maiden, like Eurydice, into premature death. The poem ends with a miraculous thunderstorm, and Plath's joy at being reunited with her 'lost' husband is

Like the first thunder cloudburst engulfing
The drought in August
When the whole cracked earth seems to quake
And every leaf trembles
And everything holds up its arms weeping.

The epic simile here invites us to read—to exaggerate —this minor skirmish with "fate playing" as artifice, equal to mythic Demeter's restoration of fertility to the earth when she is joyfully reunited with her daughter, Persephone, or to the mingled tears of joy and sorrow in Shakespearean recognition scenes. Hughes as Orpheus may well feel comfortable using the expansive epic simile, since Orpheus' mother was Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. He deploys this technique similarly to describe Plath's emotional response to Spain, too much of an underworld like the one that envelops Eurydice, a nightmare world of insubstantial spirits:

. . . you tried to wake up from
And could not. I see you, in moonlight,
Walking the empty wharf at Alicante
Like a soul waiting for the ferry,
A new soul, still not understanding,
Thinking it is still your honeymoon
In the happy world, with your whole life waiting,
Happy, and all your poems still to be found.

Plath's Spain mimics Eurydice's limbo, that region between the world of the living and the world of shades, to which she will be ferried after all memories fade. Indeed, in "Moonwalk," Plath sleepwalks on their honeymoon through a landscape resembling a charnel house and speaks language belonging only to the dead. In her sleep, she mouths hieroglyphs from "tomb-Egyptian" that are "Like bits of beetles and spiders / Retched out by owls. Fluorescent, / Blue-black, splintered. Bat-skulls." Hughes, like Orpheus gazing at his wife from the dimension of life and vital color, watches Plath wander through "a day pushed inside out. / Everything in negative." He dares not wake her and "could no more join you / Than on the sacrificial slab / That you were looking for." Plath's search in sleep for an altar—the "sacrificial slab"—presages her later desperate search for a god to whom she can dedicate her writing and, finally, her life.

The mythic Orpheus, famed for his ability to animate what is dead, to imbue nature with his song, is also famed as the poet who fails, who looks back at the crucial moment and loses Eurydice, who then fades, loses corporeality, and becomes a shade. Indeed, Orpheus might be defined as the poet who fails, whose verse is dedicated to a compulsion to repeat this failure, fixated as he is on the lyric moment when desire comes into being as longing and regret for what may never be. As Eurydice dies twice, so Plath figuratively dies many times in *Birthday Letters,* as if retreating from the vividly realized life which Hughes as poet-Orpheus briefly restores to her, fading again into a

dark underworld, dematerializing as Eurydice did into shadows. Hence, in "The Blue Flannel Suit," Hughes relives her appearance and still concentration on the first morning when Plath teaches at Smith College, only to lose the memory of her in the shade of her loss: "as I am stilled / Permanently now, permanently / Bending so briefly at your open coffin." The paradoxical rocking between "permanently" and "briefly," between a "now" and an implicit forever, is commensurate to the realization of loss as a brief moment, even while its trauma is lasting. Even more moving is the ending to "Daffodils," a poem that returns to the first and only spring they would enjoy in their English home:

We had not learned
What a fleeting glance of the everlasting
Daffodils are. Never identified
The nuptial flight of the rarest ephemera—Our
own days!

As with "The Blue Flannel Suit," his memory of this lost moment is at once fleeting and everlasting, ephemeral and eternal.

In an Orpheus-like reversal of a trope that conventionally celebrates spring rebirth, the "everlasting daffodils" come to haunt Hughes with her death and his loss, as "On that same groundswell of memory, fluttering / They return to forget" her every year. Only the "wedding-present scissors," which they lost while cutting daffodils in the garden, remember, but what they remember is her death: "April by April / Sinking deeper / Through the sod—an anchor, a cross of rust." For Plath, as for Eurydice, there is no Christ-like resurrection; the scissors are a rusting anchor pulling her down and a symbol for a life prematurely cut short. As a symbol of the Plath-Hughes marriage, too, the scissors both contrast and complement the meaning of the daffodils. The scissors manifest the burial of memory, its gradual submergence, and the healing of an old wound, while the daffodils are "Wind-wounds, spasms from the dark earth," keeping Plath's loss fresh in the poet's heart. Indeed, many of Hughes's *Birthday Letters* may be read as "wind-wounds," with the wind as a familiar trope for poetic inspiration and wounds reminding the reader of lyric poetry's conventional relief of anguish through its expression.

This final phrase to capture daffodils also echoes Hughes's description of the birth of the windflower from Adonis' bloody wounds in *Tales from Ovid:* "His blood began to seethe—as bubbles thickly / Bulge out of hot mud." In the *Metamorphoses,* the "minstrel's songs" of Ovid's Orpheus end with this tale of Venus and Adonis and her mourning tribute to her lover, another life prematurely cut short, but immortalized by her in the spring return of a flower blooming from his blood:

"Memorials of my sorrow,
Adonis, shall endure; each passing year
Your death repeated in the hearts of men
Shall re-enact my grief and my lament.
But now your blood shall change into a flower."

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As Hughes renders this episode in his *Tales,* Venus promises, " 'The circling year itself shall be your mourner,' " along with the "bright-blooded" windflower and its brief bloom: "Its petals cling so weakly, so ready to fall / Under the first light wind that kisses it." In contrast, the Orpheus of *Birthday Letters* wants to memorialize nature's forgetfulness in the daffodils, as if Hughes were engaged in a type of mourning that seeks release rather than Venus' enduring attachment to her loss□or, perhaps, Sylvia Plath's enduring attachment to her dead father. The pathetic fallacy of Venus' windflowers is painfully acknowledged as a failure.

While Hughes may be adopting an Orpheus identity for many of his lyrics, then, he does not seek Orpheus' fate. Indeed, it is precisely here that Hughes and Orpheus may be said to part ways. In Ovid, the melancholic Orpheus retreats from human company, especially women's, and ultimately incurs their wrath for ignoring their attentions:

. . . a frenzied hand
Of Thracian women, wearing skins of beasts,
From some high ridge of ground caught sight of
him.
"Look!" shouted one of them, tossing her hair
That floated in the breeze, "Look, there he is,
The man who scorns us!" and she threw her lance
Full in Apollo's minstrel's face . . .

Orpheus is sacrificed to the frenzy of these Maenads, his limbs torn apart, his voice "that held the rocks entranced" having no persuasive power over the scorned women. While Hughes has not escaped the wrath of feminists over the years, he portrays himself in *Birthday Letters* as at last freeing himself from a scene of sacrifice conceived originally by Plath.

Your Aztec, Black Forest / God of the euphemism
Grief.

The Orpheus disguise, then, is sustained long enough for Hughes to mourn Plath with an extravagance derived from ancient literary sources, to remember all of the key moments in his marriage to Plath with mythic embellishment; but, finally, he moves toward catharsis and dissolution of grief. As Freud describes normal mourning, "Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and the detachment of the libido from it accomplished." The term cathexis denotes an investment of emotional significance, while a hypercathexis is an exertion of counter-energy, an effort to dis-invest and take back the energy given to the lost love object. In *Birthday Letters,* counter-energy is exerted most strongly in poems in which Hughes engages Plath's own mourning verse. In "The God," he describes her muse as evolving out of her "panic of emptiness" as a writer, her anxiety over having no tale to tell, no story "that has to be told." To this "dead God / With a terrible voice," she first offers' "Little phials of the emptiness" and "Oblations to an absence. / Little sacrifices." Gradually, however, this terrible God wants more substantial and larger

offerings, and, as Hughes describes this process in several poems, nothing will satiate Plath's fiery God but "blood gobbets of me" until,

You fed the flames with the myrrh of your mother
The frankincense of your father
And your own amber and the tongues
Of tire told their tale.

Only by giving up her father, mother, husband, and finally herself to this roaring beast of a god does Plath find her poetic narrative. Hughes can only watch

. . . everything go up
In the flames of your sacrifice
That finally caught you too till you
Vanished, exploding
Into the flames
Of the story of your God
Who embraced you
And your Mummy and your Daddy□Your
Aztec, Black Forest
God of the euphemism Grief.

Here Hughes indicts Plath for her inability to discriminate between grief and self-flagellation, between a normal mourning that gradually accepts loss and suicidal depression with its inevitable component of murderous aggression.

As Hughes portrays Plath's so-called "Grief," it is born out of her fear that she has no story to tell but the one given to her by her psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher about an Electracomplex:

Beutscher [sic]
Twanging the puppet strings
That waltzed you in air out of your mythical grave
To jig with your Daddy's bones on a kind of
tightrope . . .

Hughes accuses Plath of making "Grief" her excuse for relinquishing her agency and voice as a writer in order to perform and to please□even to pander to□others. In "Blood and Innocence," she willingly endures shock treatments because "They demanded it. Oh, no problem"; then "they" want her to come back from her suicide attempt so long as she does not mind a poetic reconstructive surgery that is monstrous: "Yourself by Frankenstein, stiffkneed, / Matricidal, mask in swollen plaster." Still, "they" want more□the corpse of her father□and she is eager to oblige: "Why on earth didn't you say. / Daddy unearthed" in order for her to "howl" her childhood loss and then to avenge it by killing him again and dancing on his grave. "They" are never identified but at times resemble the doctors who, in Hughes's view, mismanaged her electroshock therapy and then patched her back together with Freudian theory, who encouraged her to "kill her

mother and father so that she might be born again." At others, "they" are Plath's audience, the "peanut-crunching crowd" of "Lady Lazarus" who await the show which she is willing to put on for the sake of "some acknowledgement"; and they are Maenads, the feminists who are content only with finding someone to blame, who revel in dismemberment and sacrifice. They are "Grinning squabbling overjoyed" at the carnage that she performs, the rage against husband and father that she enacts in her poems.

The Maenad-feminists who have hounded him over the years find their inspiration in a Plath described by Hughes as "Catastrophic, arterial, doomed." His final poem, "Red" describes the bedroom that he shared with Plath in Court Green as "A judgement chamber" and "A throbbing cell. Aztec altar-temple." It is another scene of sacrifice from which he seeks release not only for himself, but also, in some ways, for Plath as she is remembered in literary history. His revulsion against Plath's poetic identity as a priestess of blood is evident in his description of the impact of her ghoulish appearance:

Your velvet long full skirt, a swathe of blood
A lavish burgundy.
Your lips a dipped, deep crimson.
You revelled in red.
I felt it raw□like the crisp gauze edges
Of a stiffening wound. I could touch
The open rein in it, the crusted gleam.

Hughes ends *Birthday Letters* in flight from this portrait, mourning her adoption of a muse that needs to be fed with bloody sacrifice, when "Blue was your kindly spirit□not a ghoul / But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful." He prefers to remember Plath's genial spirit as fertile and forgiving, a guardian who is a healer, not an "open vein" and "stiffening wound," and a muse for a poet who chooses forgiveness over vengeance. Instead of the Aztec goddess bathed in red, Plath is pictured as a nurturing Madonna, whose "Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco / Folded your pregnancy / In crucible caresses." Plath's true muse was a winged creature ("Blue was wings") like Shakespeare's "dainty" Ariel, an agent for executing Prospero's revenge who also inspires the magician-artist to pity the enemies in his power. Prospero might easily punish them, but, in response to Ariel's empathy, he muses:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall hot myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou art?

Like Prospero, who knows that "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance," Hughes bids farewell to his wife with tenderness and regret, because "the jewel you lost was blue." Instead of rage and accusation, then□often regarded as the predominant emotions of Plath's grieving verse□ Hughes doubles the loss, gazing backward at his wife and fellow poet, knowing that she herself was a jewel which he failed to keep safe. Instead of a "bereft love returning to life," described by Hughes as Plath's inspiration for the *Ariel* poems, *Birthday Letters* ends with a "bereft love" being laid to final rest.

Source: Lynda K. Bundtzen, "Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*," in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 3-4, Summer 2000, pp. 455-70.

Topics for Further Study

Read some of Plath's poetry and compare the style and voice to that of Hughes's poems in *Birthday Letters*. What are the main similarities and differences?

If the Hughes-Plath scandal had occurred today instead of in the early 1960s, how would it have been handled differently in the media and by British society? Would there be any difference in the British and American responses?

For years, Plath fans placed blame for her death directly on Hughes. What does current psychology research suggest about the cause of most suicides? Is it right or wrong to blame the admittedly unfaithful husband for his wife's taking her own life?

What effect does the repetition of the words "innocence" and "daffodils" have on the first stanza of this poem? Instead of these words, what other words may have been repeated for a similar effect?

What Do I Read Next?

The Hawk in the Rain (1957) is Hughes's first collection of poetry. It was met with some of the highest acclaim of any young poet of the time. It is worth reading today just to note the remarkable contrast to the poems from *Birthday Letters*, his last collection.

Though published nearly three decades ago, Keith Sagar's *The Art of Ted Hughes* (1975) is still an intriguing, compact look at the poet's work in the first decade after Plath's death. It also includes a biography of Hughes's childhood and the author's take on Hughes's influence on Plath's poetry.

Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) was published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas a month before her death. The novel takes place in New York at the height of the Cold War, and the story of the heroine's breakdown and near death are modeled after Plath's own similar experience during the early 1950s, when she suffered from depression and made her first suicide attempt.

Plath wrote a collection of poems, *Ariel* (1965), just prior to her death. It was edited by Hughes and published posthumously. Written feverishly in the months after Hughes left her, this book contains the infamous poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," among others. It has become one of the bestselling volumes of poetry published in England and America in the twentieth century.

Further Study

Hughes, Ted, *New Selected Poems, 1957-1994*, Faber and Faber, 1995.

When Hughes came out with this collection, many readers were surprised to find a selection at the end of this book of previously unpublished poems that were unmistakably written to and about his late wife Sylvia Plath. This comprehensive book provides an excellent overview of Hughes's entire career and a first glimpse of the much-sought "Sylvia" poems.

Plath, Sylvia, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Karen V. Kukil, Anchor Books, 2000.

Kukil, the supervisor of the Plath collection at Smith College, has carefully transcribed the journals Plath kept between 1950 and a few months prior to her suicide. There is perhaps no better way to try to understand her thoughts, emotions, and feelings about Hughes than to read them in her own words.

Scigaj, Leonard M., ed., *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*, G. K. Hall, 1992.

This book contains close to twenty essays by various critics, scholars, and poets and provides a good variety of Hughes analyses. Discussions include Hughes's performance as poet laureate, his poetic style, and several articles on his major volumes of poems.

Wagner, Erica, *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and the Story of "Birthday Letters,"* Faber and Faber, 2000.

Wagner's exploration of the intense, destructive relationship between Hughes and Plath is considered one of the fairest, most comprehensive looks at the lives of these two poets. She includes commentary to the poems in *Birthday Letters*, pointing out the actual events that inspired them and explaining how they relate to Plath's own work. This book is both a guide and a literary companion to Hughes's final collection.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

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Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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