

No writer can escape
the influence of his
own personal
experience essay



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' No writer can escape the influence of his own personal experience'. Explore this statement in terms of how personal experience is presented in the texts you have studied. In order to examine the statement above this essay will examine the work of both T. S. Eliot and Ted Hughes and how their own work was orientated around personal experience. Both poets experienced severe emotional trauma within their personal lives, which made it increasingly difficult to separate their personal and professional lives.

Eliot links with ' Prufrock' via his choice of whether to follow his Dionysian urges or his Apollonian obligations, which seem to stem from the issues experienced in his personal life. Vivienne, Eliot's wife was said to have ruined Eliot as a man but made him as a poet. Similarly Hughes writes of his changes from passivity to activity when trying to save his first wife Sylvia Plath. Both poets share an obsession with temporality and an ignorance of the beauty of the present exemplifying how personal experience had little to do with the themes outlined in their poetry. Both poets also show an avoidance to square up to the issues facing them, Eliot unable to find the courage to address the women " come and go" and Hughes refusing responsibility for the death of Plath by the use of impersonal imagery. In both the work of Hughes and of Eliot, the writer tries to distinguish himself from the character portrayed in their poetry. Katha Pollitt insists that " the more Hughes insists on his own good intentions and the inevitability of Plath's suicide, the less convincing he becomes". This seems like a fairly one-sided criticism of Hughes, which echoes Eliot's Prufrock in ' The Love Song of J.

Alfred Prufrock', in which he finds himself trying to decide whether he "Should, after tea and cakes and ices, have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" Prufrock delays his decision by the use of polysyndeton, convincing himself that he will not be able to answer the overwhelming question. His uncertainty is portrayed by the use of ellipsis when wondering, "how should I then presume? / And how should I begin? . ." which symbolises that he does not know how to start (determining whether to follow his Dionysian urges or his Apollonian wishes.) Although the character Prufrock seems to be middle-aged, Eliot writes most of the poem when he was only twenty-two, which would explain his reluctance to make a decisive choice of Apollonian or Dionysian. This contrasts with Hughes who, by "performing the part of your father", insists that he was trying his best to fill the paternal character that was so lacking from Plath's life.

There is a distinct disparity in the way that Eliot's Prufrock chooses to delay in the 'Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and Hughes in 'The Tender Place' where he forces his "hand on the calibrated lever" to save Plath who is figuratively described as "a rigid bent bit of wire". This is also an example of Hughes dehumanizing Plath to make her suicide seem inevitable. Hughes uses the repetition of words such as "somebody" (wired you up) to try to exonerate himself from blame. This contrasts with A. David. Moody who insists, when writing about 'La Figlia Che Piange' that "accepting ideal passion may not be satisfied in any actual world, nor yet in romantic dreams, the poet turned away from them". This outlines the main idiosyncrasy between the work of Hughes and the work of Eliot in that Hughes writes to

prove his despondency and despair over the death of his wife and Eliot writes passively, in search of a more Apollonian, isolated lifestyle.

Eliot shows his fixation with the Dionysian/Apollonian argument, which contrasts with Hughes who writes of Plath as beyond saving. T. S. Eliot writes, in 'Tradition and Individual Talent' that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality". This is a claim that seems to particularly resonate with 'the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' where Eliot is "like a patient etherized upon a table". He uses the numbness of this medicinal imagery to separate himself from the Dionysian ideals, which obstructed his obligations to follow an Apollonian lifestyle.

This particularly resonates with Hughes in 'The Tender Place' where he is "holding in the entrails" of his relationship with Plath. This macabre representation of Plath on her deathbed is an example of how Hughes uses imagery of dissection to signify that his wife was beyond saviour. Eliot's first marriage, in 1915, to the ballet-dancer Vivienne Haigh-Wood, turned out to be unhappy. This marital failure represents a link between Hughes and Eliot; Hughes' marriage to American poet Sylvia Plath also failing, from 1956 until her death by suicide in 1963 at the age of 30. The avoidance to react, apparent in both the work of Hughes and the work of Eliot, seems to stem from an obsession with temporality. In 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' Eliot uses floral imagery of the "sunless dry geraniums" to allude to his wife (whose brief beauty had dissipated with age) meaning that as Vivienne fell ill, Eliot became increasingly more detached from his wife. This avoidance displayed by Eliot somewhat contrasts with Hughes' passivity in 'Suttee' where he describes Plath as "a scream stuck in a groove", implying that she

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was beyond saving, that she was “ stuck” in a position beyond redemption. Erica Wagner insists, in ‘ Ariel’s Gift’, that in ‘ Birthday Letters’, “ Hughes confronts the accusation levelled against him” and accepts that “ he was responsible for Plath’s death, in a way he never had before” .

Hughes could never escape the influence of his own personal experience and forced him to address the issues of his past in ‘ Birthday Letters’, a collection of eighty-eight poems, which is widely considered to be Hughes’ most explicit response to the suicide of his wife. ‘ Birthday Letters’ forms the very antithesis of the work of Eliot, which seeks avoidance from the overpowering women who “ come and go / Talking of Michelangelo”. Hughes and Eliot both show an obsession with temporality in their work. In ‘ Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Eliot insists “ that the French are ‘ more critical’ than we” when writing that “ criticism is as inevitable as breathing” tying the work of Eliot to his French predecessors. This is shown in “ La Figlia che Piange” which was published in 1920 as part of ‘ Prufrock and other observations’, in which he examines, through the introspections of the narrator, the emptiness and soulless quality of the bleak social world surrounding him. This seems to particularly allude to “ The Love of Lies” by Charles Baudelaire, where Baudelaire writes of a “ skilled lover” who’s “ heart bruised like a peach is ripe like her body”. This is akin to the soul that “ leaves the body torn and bruised” in “ La Figlia che Piange” which exemplifies the ongoing Apollonian/Dionysian argument in the work of Eliot.

The observation of the “ body torn and bruised” contrasts with the highly detailed, impersonal imagery of Plath in “ The Shot” where she is described with “ sound-barrier events along your flight path”. This in itself contrasts <https://assignbuster.com/no-writer-can-escape-the-influence-of-his-own-personal-experience-essay/>

with the more apologetic, vulnerable allusion to Plath's depression portrayed by her "sob-sodden Kleenex / and your Saturday night panics". The negative effect that Plath had on the work of Hughes echoes with the inspiration of Vivienne who ruined Eliot as a man but made him as a poet. The failure to preserve the life of Vivienne is echoed in the obsession with temporality displayed by Eliot in "La Figlia che Piange" which was described by David Moody as "using use time to fend off tedium and its moral implication".

In "La Figlia che Piange" Eliot uses the aestheticized image of a distraught, crying girl he once encountered who is "simple and faithless as a child" as an example of temporal degradation. He also uses floral imagery to idealize the beauty of the women. This obsession with the impermanence of beauty is apparent in "Your Paris" where "through frame after frame" Hughes suggests a compulsive attention to detail.

This imagery of meticulous observation shows his fascination of the effects of time and temporality. Eliot finds it hard to transfer his feelings into words contrasting with the free-flowing verse written by Hughes. In 'Hughes and the female addressee' Neil Roberts states that "Apostrophic poetry is characterized by a paradoxical temporality, the absent is addressed as if it were present, the dead as if she was alive". Hughes tries to remain in full control of this paradox in "Sam" where Hughes questions Plath "how did you cling on? Baby monkey". After Plath's death Hughes became the executor of Plath's personal and literary estates, which must have served as a constant reminder of his wife. He oversaw the publication of her manuscripts, including *Ariel* (1966). The way that Hughes seems to converge

with Plath resonates with the recurring imagery of eyes, used by Eliot, to show the intensity of the relationships of which he is writing.

In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" Eliot contrasts his depiction of innocence in "that child's eye" with a carnal representation of a prostitute who "winks a feeble eye" and "smiles into corners". This portrayal of the conflicts of humanity is in contrast to the heavy, mechanical imagery used by Hughes in "The Machine" describing Plath as "the grinding indifferent / millstone of circumstance". Eliot insists, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates". This resonates with both poets, Hughes who uses imagery of dissection, in "The Tender Place" to demonstrate the literal and psychological repercussions of this division. His thoughts are displayed "like an X-ray / Brain-map still dark-patched / With the scorched-earth scars / of your retreat". This reverberates with Eliot in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" where a "magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen". Eliot uses this dispassionate imagery to expose his true feelings as an influx in emotion threatens to override his Apollonian preset.

Moreover, he previously states that "It is impossible to say just what I mean", suggesting that this quantification of life is an impersonal statement showing that he wishes he was able to project his feelings on a screen for all to see. There is a link between Prufrock, an element of Eliot's Psyche, and the Plath portrayed by childish imagery, reflecting her self-conscious self. A. Moody claims "the poet in it is opposing himself to Prufrock and all he represents by a dedoublement of personality". This echoes with the work of <https://assignbuster.com/no-writer-can-escape-the-influence-of-his-own-personal-experience-essay/>

Hughes who uses oppositions of the “ mass grave of Verdun” with an “ anecdotal aesthetic touch” to show the two contrasting sides of Plath.

Beset by depression, and with a history of suicide attempts, Plath took her own life on 11 February 1963, although it is unclear whether she meant to ultimately succeed. This associates with ‘ The Waste land’ where Eliot cannot disassociate Vivienne from her “ shadow at morning striding behind you / or your shadow at evening rising to meet you”. This gothic representation of Vivienne forces Eliot to announce that “ I will show you fear in a handful of dust” which shows how he is unable to portray his true feelings, without Prufrock, and needs to convert “ fear” into an inanimate object confirming “ the opposition between Prufrock and all he represents. ‘ The Waste land’ was composed during a period of personal difficulty for Eliot as his marriage was failing, and both he and Vivienne were suffering from nervous disorders.

This use of conflicting imagery resonates with how “ the really fine rhetoric of Shakespeare occurs in situations where the character in the play sees himself in a dramatic light” . This particularly echoes Eliot as Prufrock stating, “ I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be”. This use of bathetic imagery represents Eliot making up his mind to accept his Apollonian responsibilities. This ongoing argument with Eliot’s own Psyche is reminiscent of the “ child-bride” of Plath in ‘ Sutte’ where she is described “ in flames” as “ our newborn” representing her ongoing self-conscious self. Hughes uses enjambment in his poetry to create a flowing impersonal violence asking Plath “ How many seizures . . .

Did you suffer this god to grab you . . . By the roots of your hair? ” He exacerbates this by use of imagery of a mental hospital when describing Plath “ in your straps” which corresponds to Eliot and his first wife Vivienne who spent the latter years of her life in a mental hospital in Switzerland. In conclusion it can be said that many writers, both of poetry and prose, try to establish boundaries between their personal experiences and their work, however in the case of Ted Hughes and T. S.

Eliot it appears that these boundaries become impossible to fully establish. The work of T. S. Eliot represents a personal failure at lacking the courage to follow his Dionysian urges. He is convinced he “ should have been a pair of ragged claws / scuttling across silent seas” making no discernable progress in life.

J. C. C. Mays suggests “ Prufrock describes his vision in terms of delusion –as a threatening world of dream in which he drowns” which epitomises the cowardice felt by Eliot over not asking the overwhelming question. Similarly the work of Ted Hughes is singularly written about his ‘ personal experiences’ with Sylvia Plath and his incapacity to help save her.

Much of his work exemplifies the guilt felt by Hughes and the understanding that she had “ to bury herself at last in the heart of the god”. His poetry in ‘ Birthday Letters’ was said to “ display an inordinate degree of literary self-consciousness” .