

The mercy of memory
the known and the
unknown in ted
hughes birthday
letters and ...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Mercy of Memory: The Known and the Unknown in Ted Hughes??™

For years after Sylvia Plath??™s death, Ted Hughes, her estranged husband and executor of her literary estate, kept himself away from the critical fray that erupted over Plath??™s legacy.

Although he was demonized terribly by Plath??™s fans and scholars over what they saw as his complicity in her suicide due to his infidelity and abandonment of Plath and their children in late 1962, he never sought to correct misconceptions or justify his own actions during that time. He merely continued to write his poetry and raise his children as he saw fit. While he did write several essays during his lifetime about Plath??™s work (such as ??? On the Chronological Order of Plath??™s Poems??? (1966) and ??? Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, and *Ariel*??? (1995)), he never sought to provide any intimate details of their life together until 1998 when he published two volumes of poetry about Plath, *Birthday Letters* and *Howls & Whispers*. Hughes used these poems to create a portrait of a deeply complex relationship between the two poets, one in which both secrets were kept and truth exposed.

These works were his chance to reveal his side of the story, to answer the charges of critics and scholars, to exorcise the spirit of his long-dead wife. The poems were filled with both knowledge and ignorance, incidents with elements forgotten or only half-remembered, subconscious desires and everyday yearnings for a better, happier life. But such memories are both notoriously painful and unreliable. Within the books, the conflict between the known/remembered and the unknown/forgotten creates an almost

unbearable tension and paints a vivid portrait of the man, the woman, and the marriage of two of the giants of late twentieth-century poetry.

Hughes's use of vague memory begins in the very first poem in *Birthday Letters*, "Fulbright Scholars." This poem's first line is a question about the event of his first glimpse of Plath in a photograph of the year's new crop of Fulbright scholars. "Where was it, in the Strata?" he asks, regarding where he was when he first saw the photograph.

He remembers thinking about which of the scholars he was likely to meet, particularly "The girls," but has no memory of seeing Plath's picture in particular. Yet the poem contains some very specific sensory details of the day: "how he walked bare-footed, under hot sun, hot pavements" and the taste of the "delicious" peach (the eating of the peach recalls a similar incident in Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" where the eating of the peach symbolizes taking the chance on love despite enormous risks to his mental stability). His persona in this poem is very much that of the young poet he was at the time: fixated on images, sensory language, but forgetting specific mental details: "where he was, who he saw in the photograph, whether they were photographed with luggage. The poem ends with a reiteration of his youth ("At twenty-five") and his innocence and ignorance at the way the world operates ("my ignorance of the simplest things"). He is stunned by the many things he does not know and has yet to experience. This sense of naivete will work against him as he begins his relationship with Plath and must learn to deal with her mood swings and mental illness.

This poem represents his understanding of just how ill-prepared he truly is for all of what is to come. Like ??? Fulbright Scholars,??? the poem ??? Caratyds (1)??? begins with a question, another sign of faded memory or ignorance. Hughes admits to a memory of reading Plath??™s poem and disliking it. By stating that it was the only poem he disliked ??? through the eyes of a stranger,??? he insinuates both that he did not know Plath at this point and that there were other poems of hers that he ??? disliked??? but no longer through a stranger??™s eyes. Despite the fact that he does not ??? know??? her personally, he seems, in many ways, to know her intimately. Reading her poem, he recognizes her fragility and frigidity. He sees her poem as a trap not yet set, snapping shut on nothing, but, it is insinuated, soon to be shutting on himself.

He again emphasizes his ignorance and inexperience, detailing his understanding of being so focused on the outward sensory appearance of the world around him (??? oracular assurance???) that he ??? missed everything??? of a more subtle and psychological nature. He understood her frailty but misunderstood the deeper reasons behind the frailty. Perhaps this poem is his acknowledgement both of his inability to understand the heaviness lying within Plath??™s heart and also an acknowledgement of his own limitations towards understanding her work. Her understands the surface level but fails to grasp the deeper ??? Heaven of granite??? within.??? Caratyds (2)??? also begins with an image of ignorance and inexperience. The poem offers a glimpse of Hughes as he envisioned himself in his college days: an arrogant, haughty, elitist ??? poet,??? who believed himself superior to everyone else (with the passage of time and the

experience of age, he can now look back on his attitude of the time as ??? inane??? and filled with ??? airy emptiness???)

He recollects in the poem how he and a friend ??? concocted an attack??? in written form against Plath for what they perceived to be her poetic shortcomings. However, in retrospect, he sees now that they simply failed to understand her work due to their own ???[a]tmospherics of higher learning/ And lower socializing??? and their ??? archaic principles??? in regards to poetry. The member of his group of friends who wrote the attack (??? Our Welshman???) is equally as ignorant as Hughes of Plath??™s gift and value as a poet and would come to understand that himself years later when ??? the white noise of the elegy??? he would write for Plath after her death ??? would fill his mouth and his ear.??? Hughes??™ ignorance of Plath??™s deeply troubled psychological condition is reiterated again in the poem ??? Visit.??? Here, he recollects what is for him a silly memory of going with his friend Lucas Myers to find Plath??™s dorm window and then throwing dirt clods at it to get her attention, only to discover they had the wrong window. After Plath??™s death, Hughes is later shocked to discover, upon reading her Journals, her thoughts on that very incident and how, for her, it brought about a ??? panic??? and a feeling of ??? nightmare.

??? Her rather severe reaction to what amounted to an innocent college wooing brings to mind, for him, a similar incident in which their daughter wanders into his study and asks him, ??? Daddy, where??™s Mummy??? The innocent childhood question causes him similar panic, which allows him to identify with Plath in a way he never had before and to finally glimpse a brief understanding of the torture she endured throughout her life. In the <https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

poem ??? Sam,??? Hughes writes of a lost memory within a memory. His memory of the incident in which Plath was nearly killed while hanging from the neck of a runaway horse named Sam is marred by his inability to remember specific details (??? Did you have a helmet???). But, for him, with the distance of time, his amazement at the memory was her ability to hang on so forcefully.

She clung to life desperately that day despite her death obsession. He realizes, in the end, that for her the accident that day was a rehearsal, ??? practice,??? for her true death. She waits for the unexpected moment to suddenly fling ??? yourself off and under my feet to trip me/ ??|and lay dead.??? The next poem ??? St. Botolph??™s??? describes Hughes??™ first meeting with Plath at the launch party for the college literary magazine. He has a very vivid memory of how she looked then, but even that memory is altered by future perception (??? Taller/ Than ever you were again???; ??? I see you there, clearer, more real/ Than in any of the years in its shadow???). However, he also admits that beyond that ??? I remember/ Little from the rest of that evening??? except for the memory of pain which seems to outlast the memory of joy, the pain of his then-girlfriend??™s ??? hissing rage in a doorway??? at this flirting with Plath and ??? the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks??? Plath left behind, branding his face as her own. Although he never made a public statement about Plath??™s death and his own complicity (or lack thereof) in her untimely death, in the poem ??? The Shot,??? he does seem to admit some small role in it.

Symbolizing Plath??™s pain as a ??? bullet,??? he admits in the poem that he never understood her pain or his ability to cause or supplement it until he <https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

was struck with it and even then he ??? did not even know/ I had been hit,/ Or that you had gone clean through me??"/ To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god??? (suggesting Hughes saw himself as a conduit through which Plath had to force her pain in order to reach the memory of her father, her ??? god???). He also admits, in the end, that he was probably the wrong sort of person for her at that time as far as relating to her pain???"??? the right witchdoctor/ Might have caught you in flight with his bare hands.??? Ultimately, he finds himself alone with nothing left of her but small remnants of her life; the life itself is gone. Hughes continues to deal with his youthful inexperience and vague memories in the poem ??? 18 Rugby Street.

??? Here he realizes that he had an advance warning of her suicidal tendencies, but chose to ignore it rather than help her deal with her issues. While Hughes and Plath are kissing, he notices a scar on Plath, evidence of her previous suicidal injury, but instead of addressing it, he continued ??? [w]ithout ceasing for a moment to kiss you.??? He has a vision of a ??? sober star??? warning to him to ??? stay clear??? of Plath.

But, in his arrogance, he fails to heed his own good sense because her ??? marveled at her??? and what she represented to him, ??? beautiful America.??? He becomes so enamored with her and his thoughts of her that he loses concentration (and, with it, memory): ??? I cannot remember/ How I smuggled myself, wrapped in you/ Into the hotel.??? The feelings for Plath (and his subsequent failure to understand the consequences of their relationship and her emotional problems) have caused him to suppress certain memories in his mind. In ??? Fate Playing,??? Hughes sees, in Plath???

™s frantic agitation within the poem, himself as a ??? miracle.??? The taxi
<https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

driver laughs ???[t]o see an American girl being so American.??? Both fail to truly see or understand the deep fear and force behind her emotional outburst. This inability to understand continues in subsequent poems, such as ??? Your Paris.

??? In this poem, focusing on their European honeymoon after their marriage in England, Hughes clearly sees, in retrospect, how the two of them were people coming at things from entirely opposing perspectives and that neither of them ultimately truly attempted to understand the other??™s point of view. Hughes sees Plath??™s reaction to Paris as completely ???

American.??? She sees a city of art and dreams but with a hidden darkness which she expressed into words ??? which I decoded/ Into a language, utterly new to me/ With conjectural, hopelessly wrong meanings.??? He fails to see the pain and torture the city brings to her; her dark memories of betrayal by a former boyfriend who abandoned her there. He only sees what the city means to him. He also sees it as a place of pain, but of physical pain brought about by the war and the Nazi occupation. Wherever he looks, he sees only the bullet wounds on the buildings and the ghosts of the victims of Nazi atrocity.

After Paris, they honeymooned for a time in Spain and again, in the poem ??? You Hated Spain,??? Hughes shows us the opposing viewpoints of himself and Plath. For the two, Spain is almost the exact opposite of Paris. In Spain, Hughes ??? felt at home???; however, Plath hated it; it ??? frightened you.???

She sees Spain as a land of death, ??? the land of your dreams.??? She rejects Spain because it represents, to her, the death she has sought for so

long and now fights to keep at bay since she is in an apparently happy and
<https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

stable marriage with a man who understands her desire to be a poet.

However, she fails to understand that which Hughes, from the benefit of many years in the future, sees: that Plath is fooling herself into believing that their time in Spain was still ??? your honeymoon/ In the happy world, with your whole life waiting.

??? The next poem, ??? Moonwalk,??? expresses Plath??™s madness and desire for death from Hughes??™ point-of-view and why he could not quite comprehend what was happening to her. The poem??™s imagery is stark, dark, death-laced. The moon frequently appears in Plath??™s poetry as death, sterility, emotionlessness (as in poems such as ??? The Moon and the Yew Tree??? and ??? Edge???).

Hughes references Plath??™s moon imagery here, referring to the moon as a ??? raw lump/ Of ore, not yet smelted and shaped/ Into your managed talent.??? Death is the raw material from which Plath formed her poetry, but Hughes does not see this initially; he describes his own lack of understanding as being ??? the gnat in the ear of the wounded/ Elephant of my own/ Incomprehension.??? He cannot join her on her ??? sacrificial slab,??? for he cannot ???[e]ven imagine the priest.??? He does not see the world the same as she does, cannot imagine being so dominated by death, so he walks with her ???[a]s if seeing you for the first time.??? He finally begins to see the real Plath (??? you???): the haunted, suicidal girl beneath the happily married woman. This dawning realization continues in ??? Fever??? in which he sees firsthand the overdramatization for which Plath became well-known. She believes she is going to die from her fever and becomes so dramatic that Hughes himself fears he ??? shall not know, I shall not hear/ When things get <https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

really bad.??? Hughes offers himself an out here from those who blame him for Plath's death, arguing that he had no way of knowing that things had gotten so bad for Plath that she was contemplating suicide since she always acted as if everything was dire and life-threatening.

Hughes ends this particular poem with an image of emotional disconnection, suggesting that at this point, he was already beginning to distance himself from her emotionally and mentally. This poem represents, for him, the beginning of the end. Many of the poems that follow show this further disconnect, as the very universe itself begins to break down, symbolized by gradually increasing forgetfulness, by both Hughes and the world as a whole. In "55 Eltisle," even "[o]ur first home has forgotten us.

Yet the house clearly had memories of its former tenants, to the point where Plath becomes "revolted" by the history and goes into "a fury of scouring" in an effort to remove all traces of the house's former life. In the poem "Chaucer," Hughes recounts a memory of Plath reciting Chaucer in a cow pasture and having the cows surround her as she reads as if they are absorbing the literature from her, yet he admits he cannot remember/ "You stopping" the recitation. Finally, in "Ouija," Hughes tells the story of the spirit he and Plath conjured using the Ouija board in their home. The spirit quotes his favorite line from King Lear but then admits it "could not remember what followed./ We remembered but he could not remember.

The spirit, when pressed by the couple, delivers a shocking statement about the nature of memory: "Why shall I ever be perplexed thus/ I'd

hack my arm off like a rotten branch/ Had it betrayed me as my memory.???

This statement seems to reflect Hughes??™ own beliefs regarding his memories; he himself feels ??? betrayed??? by his memory, perhaps because he cannot remember all that he wants to, perhaps because he remembers too much and that which he does remember haunts him. After ??? Fever??? and the poems of lost memory, Hughes continues to further distance himself from Plath. In ??? The Chipmunk,??? Hughes relishes in his first real encounter with an American chipmunk (recalling his inexperience in his memory of the taste of his first real fresh peach in ??? Fulbright Scholars???). What follows is an admission by Hughes that Plath (??? You???) ??? stayed/ Alien to me as a window model.??? Despite their ??? intimate weeks??? together, he discovers he knows more about his ??? first ever real chipmunk??? than he does about his wife. In another poem, ??? The Blue Flannel Suit,??? Hughes again expresses his inability to comprehend the forces at work to destroy Plath??™s life.

While in retrospect, he sees in her, for the first time, the ??? girl who was going to die,??? at the time all he could do was sit ??? stilled,/ Unable to fathom what stilled you.??? In ??? Fishing Bridge,??? Hughes reveals a very specific memory he has of Plath on a lakefront as ??? the sun??™s dazzle??” and your delight/ Wandering off along the lake??™s fringe.??? The immediate question then becomes is it she herself wandering off (suggesting an exploration of some sort) or her ??? delight??? wandering off (suggesting a loss of pleasure and the onset of depression). Suddenly the poem shifts, and they are both wandering within the body of a maze, guided by a mysterious voice who gradually leads them to the center where they find her

death waiting. A maze is a symbol of a journey in which we are given the illusion of choice.

There is only one way to travel in the maze to get to the end and freedom, but the maze provides you with many alternatives, all leading to dead-ends. It is specifically constructed to provide only a single passage. Once you are in the maze, no matter which way you go, there is only one way out; the path is entirely predetermined. Therefore, as Hughes sees it, in regards to Plath, no matter which way she traveled, no matter what happened to her in her life, her path towards her death was always predetermined and inescapable. The poem ??? The 59th Bear??? tells the tale of a bear that broke into Hughes and Plath??'s car during a camping trip to steal their food.

Hughes initially wanted to confront the bear, chase it from the campsite, but chooses to remain with Plath inside the tent instead. The next day, they learned from park rangers that the same bear broke into another couple??'s car at a nearby campsite and the man there did confront the bear and was lethally mauled by the animal. As before, Hughes seems to remember the incident, but cannot seem to remember specific details (??? Did we sleep???; ??? What time was it???). The incident also reflects the growing distance of their artistic relationship and their opposing ways of viewing the same situation. For Hughes, the incident was a ??? dud scenario,??? nothing of any particular interest, but Plath ends up writing one of her most successful short stories about the bear, changing the story somewhat to a tale in which the husband ignores the wife, believing himself superior to

nature, and attempts to drive the bear away, only to be killed by it due to his arrogance.

He admits in the poem he did not recognize the ??? flicker??? within Plath that transformed the incident into a superb fiction or why she even felt the need to write it. In the other two travel poems, ??? Grand Canyon??? and ??? Karlsbad Caverns,??? Hughes introduces his belief that he began, during that trip, to detach himself from her and her death-laced philosophies. He blames that trip, and her depression, for driving him away, once again making the claim that it was she that was responsible for her death, not himself.

In ??? Grand Canyon,??? he focuses on how the couple gradually drifted away from one another, to the point where they are ??? sleepwalking??? and have to write notes on where they parked their car in order to remember because their minds are so fogged. They return to their car to find their ??? water-bag stolen.??? Since water frequently symbolizes rejuvenation and life, it could be suggested that here, Hughes is saying that the couple??™s quality of life has been taken away and they are left to suffer, to thirst, for what they once had.

The memory of the trip sometimes startles him even into his old age, shaking him, making Plath feel close to him again but then it gradually slips away. This slipping away mirrors perfectly the actions of the bats in ??? Karlsbad Caverns??? who somehow, ???[u]nlike us,/??!knew how, and when, to detach themselves/ From the love that moves the sun and the other stars.??? The poem ??? Black Coat??? represents Hughes??™ ??? sole memory??? of his black overcoat that he wore during his and Plath??™s last

winter together. The memory of the coat is a ??? good feeling,??? an ??? outer-edge nostalgia.??? But the memory of the coat is also tainted in the present by the knowledge that, unknown to him at the time, Plath watched him walking along the beach in that coat and, for the first time, equated him with her father, the vicious Nazi vampire of ??? Daddy,??? the living embodiment of her long-sought-after death. The bad memories continue in ??? Portraits??? in which he initially loses the memory of where the portrait of Plath ??? Howard painted??? is located and how long it took for him to paint it. He seems to want to find the painting, to hold the memory of it in his hands, but as the poem concludes, he recalls seeing the painting itself and how much Plath herself admired it because of the ??? evil??? that seemed to possess the painting.

Again, the equating of Plath with a pleasant memory from the time of their problems turns the memory dark, causing him to repress it to the point of forgetting. Hughes soon has an ??? Epiphany??? of ???[w]hat I??™d been ignoring.??? An old man in London offers him a fox cub, a representation of a natural element that has been restrained and domesticated for ownership. By buying it, Hughes would have ??? owned??? his own wildness, an ability to restrain himself from his overwhelming desire to escape the marriage. Ownership of the wild creature would have allowed his marriage to flourish, to allow him to deal with the issues of Plath??™s mental illness. But he makes the conscious choice to ??? let that fox cub go??? and, therefore, ??? failed the test.??? This is Hughes??™ most direct acknowledgement of his complicity, his choice (made freely), that led to the disintegration of his marriage.

That realization is the true ??? epiphany??? of the title. The symbol of the fox cub as Hughes??™ stable alter-ego makes another appearance later in the collection in the poem ??? The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother??? in which one of the dogs (symbolizing fans, scholars, and critics who devour Plath??™s writings without ever discovering who she really was) devours the ??? windpipe and upper lungs??? of the fox, indicating that he himself has been devoured by the Plath scholars who have stolen his voice, his ability to defend himself against the charges they have brought against him. These two volumes of poetry are nothing less than Hughes??™ attempt to retake possession of his voice and reputation.??? The Pan??? suggests that Hughes did begin at this time to get some real understanding of what Plath was capable of but found he could do (or would do) nothing to stop it from progressing. In the poem, his future ??? self??? attempts to warn him of the danger looming for Plath and for his own future reputation.

However, he refuses to acknowledge or recognize his ??? self.??? This refusal could be a realization of his own youthful inadequacy when it came to addressing his marital problems or the mental issues Plath was suffering from at the time, or it could be yet another example of his youthful arrogance, refusing to believe there is nothing he could not handle and believing love will overcome any obstacle. An older Hughes now knows the illusion that such a belief brought into his mind. He states that this future self is ??? infinitely more alive/ Than either of them there in the happy car,??? suggesting two things: that the older self (by virtue of more life experience) has more knowledge of what life holds and, therefore, is able to enjoy it more; or, significantly, that he feels more alive with Plath dead than when

she was alive, a shocking, somewhat emotionless statement that appears at odds with the remainder of the text. So what is the purpose of this line Is Hughes revealing his ??? true colors??? here Is he making a statement that is attempting to placate the Plath critics that saw him as such a monster Or is he deliberately phrasing a line in such a way that simultaneously mirrors the reactions of most Plath scholars against him and also diffuses that reaction by both acknowledging it and refuting it In all likelihood, the latter is the most obvious choice. Hughes never actually saw himself as a monster (although he did have some guilt over Plath??™s death that he admitted to the closest of friends??”???) It doesn??™t fall to many men to murder a genius,???) he told Elizabeth Sigmund not long after Plath??™s death in 1963 (Malcolm 133)) nor did he ever feel the need to justify himself to Plath??™s scholars; however, he was always seemingly concerned about how literary history would view his relationship with Plath and, therefore, would likely feel the need in his work on Plath to acknowledge the bad opinion of him in the scholarly community (particularly among the Feminist critics) and to diffuse that opinion by openly attacking it as he does so here.

In the poem, ??? Daffodils,???) we get a reversal of the book??™s trend to focus on Hughes??™ faulty memory of his life experiences with Plath and instead Hughes chooses to focus on something he remembers vividly but ??? [n]obody else remembers.???) He wonders in the poem if Plath remembers all the times the family would gather together in the springtime to pick the daffodils in their garden at Court Green. Their daughter, Frieda, has forgotten about the family gathering and has even forgotten her mother. Even the flowers appear to have ??? forgot you stooping there.???) But he remembers

it all, even the shearing scissors that they received at their wedding that were lost during one of the outings, and he knows that those lost ??? wedding-present scissors/???remember. Wherever they are.??? Here in this poem he equates himself with the lost, noting that only the lost scissors and he remember.

He actively believes that Plath, another lost figure, remembers, suggesting a link between the two of them that has lasted beyond death, indicating he still feels a connection with Plath, a romantic yearning, that is quite at odds with the unfeeling monster the scholars paint him as. Only the innocent daughter, a toddler at the time of her mother??™s death, fails to remember both because of her youth and because she has not become one of the ??? lost.??? The daughter is associated with the flowers, the living embodiment of renewal and springtime, a fresh and vivid symbol of life amongst the dead. Hughes tells us the film in ??? A Short Film??? was ??? made for happy remembering/ By people who were still too young/ To have learned about memory.??? However, now the film has been recast as a ??? dangerous weapon??? because the ??? happy memory??? has become corrupted by the horrible memory of Plath??™s death. For Hughes, the memory still hurts each time he sees the film and the memory of that pain lingers even beyond that, not just as ??? an idea of horror??? but as ??? a bracing of nerves/ For something that has already happened.

??? After ??? A Short Film,??? Hughes moves on to focusing on Plath??™s death as inevitable, as something he not only had no responsibility for but something he could not have prevented even if he had been aware of how bad the situation was for her. Plath??™s own memories in ??? The Rag
<https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

Rug??? begin to break down at this point, becoming less fluid and more disjointed ??? breath-held camera moments.??? Further, in ??? The Table,??? he again reiterates his own ignorance of Plath??™s problems: ??? I did not/ know.??? In this poem, he blames Plath??™s personal obsession with death and with her father??™s memory for both the disintegration of their marriage and her eventual suicide. He claims he could do nothing, that everything was beyond his control, as if he was following a script and ??? the roles were written on my eyelids.

??? Plath??™s own mind slips further away; her dreams in ??? Dream Life??? are filled with images of death which both alternately frighten and attract her. Then comes ??? The Rabbit Catcher.??? Unlike Plath??™s poem of the same name, a poem of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage who seeks escape to allow her voice and vision to express themselves independent of the man, Hughes??™ poem is a poem of misunderstanding and the disintegration of Plath??™s mind and thought processes. Hughes uses the poem to attempt to understand Plath??™s actions of the time. His only vivid memory of the incident in question: ??? She??™ll do something crazy.??? He has absolutely no memory of what set her off that day or what he did that caused such a violent reaction in her (and, seemingly, led to the writing of Plath??™s poem). As he watches helplessly, she rages against England and her inability to reach the sea while driving (since, under English law, all of the main beaches prohibit approach by automobile).

She spots rabbit snares along the sides of the road and stops to tear them up, believing the killing of the rabbits to be ??? cruel.??? But Hughes sees the traps as a matter of survival. Families live off the snared animals when they <https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

cannot afford to buy food. He also knows that her fury ??? cared nothing for rabbits,??? that her anger is fuelled by her understanding that he ??? could not find you, or really hear you,/ Let alone understand you.??? At the end, he questions if she perhaps caught her madness from something inside himself, ??? Nocturnal and unknown to me,??? or if it was simply her ??? doomed self??? manifesting itself at last. He does not truly endeavor to answer this question within the poem although he relates in other poems in the collection that he believes it was her own inner turmoil that undid her, but here he suggests that even if he did have some part to play in it, that it was something ??? unknown,??? unintentional. Hughes follows up ??? The Rabbit Catcher??? with ??? Fairy Tale,??? a poem in which he states specifically that he believes Plath??™s suicide was her own responsibility since it was she alone who ??? cried out in your sleep?;/Your lovesickness for that Ogre??? (which symbolizes either death itself or her father).

He tells Plath (and the reader), ???(No, it was not me, as you thought./ It was you.)??? The ??? you??? of the second line is vague and could perhaps implicate the reader himself in Plath??™s death, suggesting that the reader/scholar/critic, whose sole focus is on Plath??™s work because of its death imagery and relationship to her suicidal impulses, is partly responsible for Plath??™s death because the reader wants her story to end that way to bring closure to the poetry. Hughes seems to believe that if Plath had written happier poetry or had written poetry like she did but had not ended her life in suicide, that her work would not be revered in the way it is today. He further sees that it is Plath??™s ??? affair??? with Death and the memory of

the father that led to her death, not his literal, extramarital affair with Assia Wevill.

But, in the end, he suffers equally because of her death desire, because of his historic legacy tied with her. He ??? tripped/ Over your corpse and fell with him [death or the father]/ Into his abyss.??? Like ??? The Rabbit Catcher,??? ??? The Blackbird??? is a response to one of Plath??™s own poems, in this case ??? The Jailer.??? In that poem, Plath creates a scenario in which she sees herself as a prisoner of a jailer who starves her creatively and only allows her to write on subjects and images that he chooses rather than allow her to have her own creative freedom.

In ??? The Blackbird,??? Hughes argues that it was not him imprisoning her, but she imprisoning him with her death wish and suicide which caused his reputation to suffer due to the images of his failed role as ??? your nurse and protector.??? Hughes again stresses his ignorance of his circumstances in relation to Plath in ??? Robbing Myself.??? In the poem, he strolls through the couple??™s summer home in Court Green during the winter months when the house is shut up and empty (whether this event occurs before or after Plath??™s death is never made clear). He reiterates again that ??? I did not know??? several times throughout the poem and ends with an acknowledgement of Plath??™s death that he claims he did not understand was coming.

He does, however, have some understanding of Plath??™s death wish and his relationship to it. In ??? A Picture of Otto,??? he acknowledges the connection between Otto, Plath??™s father, and himself within Plath??™s

artistic mythology and how she sought to blend the two of them together in her work. He claims this, and not the actual extramarital affair, is why Plath seems to focus her blame on him toward the end of her life. She was actually manifesting the hatred of her father's abandonment of her as a child on Hughes as an adult. Another poem of memory, "Fingers" questions if anyone will remember Plath's fingers after he has gone.

The fingers represent the physical, tangible action of creating the art (whether writing poetry or playing the piano, two different art forms Hughes mentions in the poem). This poem suggests the error of Plath scholars in focusing on her subject matter rather than her technical gifts as a poet. In the poem's end, he acknowledges his memory of her fingers (suggesting his understanding of Plath's genius focused more on her technical artistry than her subject matter) and that their daughter remembers Plath's fingers with her own, suggesting both the immortality that comes through children and perhaps an acknowledgement of his appreciation for his daughter's own artistic development. In both ways, Plath's poetic genius continues to live on in the "fingers" of her daughter. The second collection, *Howls & Whispers*, the last volume of poetry Hughes published during his lifetime, focuses much more on Plath's legacy as a poet and his role in promoting that legacy through his own work as her literary executor.

In "The Difference," for example, he creates a chilling poem of a man "out of his depth" in dealing with a mentally ill wife and her legacy to him. She collapses to the kitchen floor (both a symbol of domesticity and a literal representation of Plath's death since she died lying on the floor of <https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

the kitchen). He seemingly aids in her recovery only to have Death claim her with such finality and suddenness that he can literally do nothing to stop it. His inability to control Plath's artistic recovery grows to the point where he can do nothing to prevent critics and scholars from persecuting him for actions that were not his fault (he tries to aid her recovery only to see her die regardless of his actions). In "The Minotaur 2," Hughes views his life with Plath as a plot unfolding, a prewritten course over which he has no control and cannot be altered. The skein of blood she chooses to follow leads her to the very centre of the labyrinth (again the maze symbolism as in "Fishing Bridge" suggests a predestined conclusion where free will and choice are illusionary at best) where the Minotaur waits to kill you, suggesting that her death was preordained and of her own making, a death over which he had no control or blame.

However, in the poem "Howls & Whispers," he does suggest that others are to blame for her death, specifically Plath's mother, her analyst, and her friends, by driving her to suicide with their rumors, innuendoes, and bad advice. Hughes says that he has found the letters from these individuals that he believes Plath left him ("waved in my face") after her death in an effort, perhaps, to get him to understand her reasons for taking her own life, reasons that had nothing whatsoever to do with him. In "The City," Hughes creates a vision of himself searching through a large city (the dark city of her poetic work) looking for Plath. He finds the real Her, the one he believes she really was and would have been had she lived ("sixty years old"). He immediately recognizes her, but the other people journeying

through the city (readers, scholars) pass right by her, so intent on studying the work to find her, they miss the true her completely. Hughes knows that Plath sees him, but he is unsure if she remembers who he is anymore or if she is trying hard not to remember him, perhaps she does not recognize him in the city of her work because he (as a literal individual) is not truly there, only a metaphoric representation that does not reveal his true self or the true matter of their relationship to one another, suggesting (as many critics have stated about *The Bell Jar*) that, despite some autobiographical leanings, all of Plath's work is nothing more than fictional approximations to the dark reality of her situation. In the collection's penultimate poem, "The Offers," Hughes believes he sees Plath on a train as he commutes from London to his home in Court Green after her death.

She initially ignores him, just as she does in "The City," suggesting his true lack of importance within her work. He becomes helpless; simply a blank, bodiless gaze, an interpretation of his feelings regarding her condition while she was alive. He was nothing more than a helpless spectator in her descent towards suicide, not an active participant in her decline. He is haunted by her, however; never able to get free of her influence, she becomes as much (if not more) of a presence in his life dead as she was alive.

But now the communication that seemed such a problem in their life (he never had a true understanding of her depression or other mental problems) is even worse, he cannot respond to her as she sits there and she does not even attempt at speaking to him. He feels that she is daring him to speak to her, however, but he does not because he knows such talk will not appease

<https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>

the living. No matter what he reveals in public about their life together or about their happiness, he knows that certain fans and scholars will never believe his innocence in regards to her death; they will always believe that he is the one who killed her. So, instead, he separates the memory of her face (Plath's true self that he himself knew personally) from the new face she wears (the self that has been given to her by the scholars and the critics who never knew her beyond her art). He then sees within Plath the face of Assia Wevill, the rival whom Plath blamed for taking him away from her and their family. He sees the two women as essentially the same. He sees the artistic flare within them both and smells the gas by which they both died (Wevill committed suicide by gas asphyxiation in 1969). He tries to convince himself all of this is coincidence.

He finds himself fantasizing about Plath's still being alive and sending him pretty holiday cards from Honolulu (which can be equated with the Paradise that awaits us in the afterlife). Regardless, he remains her living hostage (as in *The Blackbird*), forever punished for his supposed sins of public perceptions and metaphoric image. His final image of her is her speaking to him in *my helpless moment* as he stands naked and vulnerable stepping into his bathroom tub, telling him, *This is the last. This one. This time/ Don't fail me.* This final line represents the ultimate fear for Hughes, that somehow he has failed her in his role as literary executor and his historic role as husband. He knows that he has made mistakes of forgetfulness and ignorance and artistic arrogance, but he hopes ultimately that the poems he has written for her here at the end of his life and his career have made up for his failures in the past. Hughes was a

tortured man, tortured by his own failures as a husband, a father, a lover, and an artist.

His claims that he did the best that he could with the little information he had at the time help to assuage his own guilt and, he hopes, grant him some measure of forgiveness by the reading public. The critical reception both *Birthday Letters* and *Howls & Whispers* received from the literary community demonstrated that Hughes's own artistic gifts were as strong as ever and that most scholars, now given his side of the story of his and Plath's life together, were coming to understand the complexity of the relationship and were willing to reserve their judgment in further demonizing Hughes as a villain and murderer. At the end, Hughes cemented forever his own legacy as partner, lover, husband, victim of the Plath legacy, and artistic genius in his own right.

His final printed words (in the final poem of *Howls & Whispers* titled "Superstitions") reveals the awful pain of his dredging of the past, the truly dark price of recollection, and a fitting conclusion to this powerful set of poetic works and the art of a most extraordinary poet. The final words of this poem are: "Remembering it will make your palms sweat,/ The skin lift blistering, both your lifelines bleed." Works Cited Hughes, Ted. *Collected Poems*. Ed.

Paul Keegan. New York: Farrar, 2003. Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. New York: Random House, 1993. Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*.

Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper, 1981.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-mercy-of-memory-the-known-and-the-unknown-in-ted-hughes-birthday-letters-and-howls-whispers/>