



## QUESTION 10 – Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*

Conflicting perspectives arise from the subjectivity of composers in their representation of events, personalities and situations, and that of responders in their reception of meaning. Textual form, and hence the techniques used to convey these perspective has <sup>significantly</sup> shaped my understanding of the way in which these perspectives can arise from a range of factors, such as emotional attachment, retrospective understanding and responders' presumptions. Ted Hughes' confessional poems "Fulbright scholars" and "Your Paris" (1998), Sarah Churchill's essay secrets and lies (2001) and Joe Wright's film Atonement (2007) similarly exploit their respective textual forms to explore the processes of selection and emphasis which colour our perceptions of events.

Perspective is fluid and shifts with time, subjectively coloured by hindsight through memory. Hughes' ~~autobiographical~~ poem "Fulbright scholars" uses the textual form of autobiography and confessional poetry to explore the conflicting perspectives of an older nostalgic Hughes.

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and his younger "twenty-five" year-old self. We are introduced to Hughes' persona through parallel repetition as he recalls, "maybe I noticed you [Plath], maybe I weighed you up." The low modality language of "maybe" evokes an atmosphere of naive uncertainty and brings to light the tension between his unreliable memory and his retrospection. As he first sights Plath, he alludes her to beautiful Hollywood actress Veronica Lake. However, it is Plath's public persona of her "Veronica Lake bang" and "exaggerated American grin" that hid her inner psychological turmoil. A mature Hughes attributes his younger perspective to his youthful naivety, where he was unknowing of Plath's volatile nature. As he re-evaluates his perspective, he imposes his privileged knowledge of Plath's emotional instability onto his memory of her. Hughes' Biblical reference where he eats a "delicious" "first fresh peach", symbolic of his temptation towards Plath, suggests the simplistic innocence of their first encounter. The

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sensual imagery creates an emotive, personal tone which persuades responders to empathise with Hughes as a vulnerable youth "dumbfounded afresh" by Plath. Therefore, Hughes exploits this autobiographical and poetic textual form, ~~to~~ using poetic techniques to shape my understanding ~~that~~ ~~pro~~ of the subjectivity of perspective which can change with hindsight.

~~The pro~~

All responders are coloured by presumptions and prior knowledge, often conflicting with that of the composer and one another. Though Hughes purports that Birthday Letters was addressed "directly" to Plath, Sarah Churchill exploits the formal textual form of a scholarly essay, secrets and lies to suggest otherwise. She argues that the publications were in fact an oxymoronic "open secret" which commodified the Hughes-Plath relationship to sway public opinion. Churchill suggests that Hughes' Birthday Letters was, to an

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extent, a cathartic response to his past with Plath; yet, there is a subliminal motivation to exonerate himself from being labelled Plath's "murderer". Hughes vindicates himself through emotively encouraging responses to empathise with his plight as a "passive victim", thereby dispelling their presumptions of his "villainous" nature. However, Churchwell repetitiously emphasises the impossibility of interpreting *Birthday Letters* ~~with~~ without the metaphorical "inspection" of bias ~~due~~ <sup>due</sup> to ~~pre~~ prior knowledge about their relationship. The formality of ~~the~~ <sup>her</sup> third person language in this textual form of an essay lends her perspective academic weight, and is reinforced by biographer Malcolm. Malcolm confirms through personification that Hughes' public letters "emerged into the public already flanked by the caricatures of the battle between Hughes and 'the feminists'". Churchwell juxtaposes these viewpoints through conflicting personal

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pronouns as "version of the story: my story, your story", highlighting the difficulty of reconciling the pre-conceived perspectives of the "reading public". Therefore, the textual form ~~exploit~~ is used by Churchill to exploit techniques in order to enhance my understanding of the factors shaping conflicting perspectives.

Due to the inherent subjective bias and personal motivations of individuals, both composers and responders are unable to assess people and events in an objective manner. Hughes' poem "Your Paris" significantly uses its autobiographical, poetic textual medium to highlight the antagonistic perspectives of Paris between a young Hughes and Plath, and the tension between a young and mature Hughes through application of autobiographical hindsight. Whilst Hughes adopts a "post-war utility survivor" outlook, he claims that Plath was "not vanished by Paris' aesthetic", superficial American

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qualities. However, an older Hughes ~~shifts~~ shifts his initial perspective through retrospection <sup>and</sup> suggests by sensory metaphor that Plath's view of Paris was "diesel aflame to the dog in me." The canine references position responders to empathise with a young, naively loyal Hughes who was unknowing of Plath's "one walking wound." The alliteration reflects Plath's grotesque, tormented self which she hid behind a deceptive facade of "gushy bewblings." Hughes accounts for his contrasting younger perspective through ~~illuminating~~ illuminating his innocent "hopeless" inability to understand Plath's "language, utterly new to me" and her mental instability <sup>and</sup> to her obsessive attachment to her father, a "stone god." The allusion to deity reveals ~~Hughes~~ the autobiographical textual medium of Hughes' poem, where he imposes his knowledge of Plath's Electro Complex onto his poetry. Thus, we understand the inherent subjectivity of all perspectives, which ultimately influences one's interpretation

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of events.

Emotional attachment influences both the composer and responder's interpretations, leading to conflicting perspectives of events, personalities and situations.

Wright's film *Atonement* <sup>explores</sup> uses filmic devices from its medium of production to explore the tension between the perspectives of naive thirteen-year-old Briony and her sister Cecilia in viewing the actions of Cecilia's lover, Robbie. Living in 1930s England, Briony attempts to protect Cecilia's integrity by falsely accusing Robbie of sexual assault. We first gain insight into the couple's relationship through Briony's point of view shot. The ominous music as she enters the library evokes a sense of foreboding which foreshadows the culpability of the couple's compromising position she witnesses. Her derogatory label of Robbie as a "sex maniac" is coloured, however, by her fanciful emotions due to her budding sexuality.

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Her naive perspective is therefore rendered doubtful, which mirrors Hughes' youthful inexperience. Wright repeats the library scene from Cecilia's perspective, whose view is clouded by her emotional attachment to Robbie. The soft, dim lighting emphasises the warm and intimate atmosphere <sup>created by</sup> of the earthy brown colours. We are thus positioned to understand that the couple's intimacy is not sexual as well as Bronny claims, but rather, a product of their "mutual love". Similar to Hughes, it is only through hindsight, <sup>and flash-forward</sup> that a mature Bronny realises the love between Cecilia and Robbie and the consequences of her insidious lie.

Therefore, textual form has been significantly exploited by Hughes in his poems "Fulbright Scholars" and "Your Paris", Churchwell in her essay secrets and lies, and Wright's film Stonement to convey and emphasise the techniques which ultimately shape my personal understanding of conflicting perspectives.