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Travesty of Truth: A Reading of Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters

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Abstract:

In last of his confessional anthology of eighty eight verses, 'Birthday Letters'(1998), Ted Hughes endeavours to uphold his bitter-sour conjugal relationship with Sylvia Plath. But ironically, he fails to represent truth and what he presents is nothing but travesty and perversion of half-truth. The reading shows how Hughes takes pain to prove himself honest, innocent and guiltless and holds Plath solely responsible for the catastrophic end of their conjugal life, with the suicide of Plath. He paints per as a psychopath suffering from Electra complex. She is painted as a great bird of prey during their love-making. Again, she is compared to panther, the ferocious beast of prey. She is depicted by Hughes as a feverish, impulsive, possessive and traumatic psychopath.. Even her beauty is mockingly presented by Hughes which is a lie, for she was truly beautiful. He accuses her by saying that he was 'dumfounded' by her whereas the truth is just the opposite. Hughes left Plath for Assia Gutmann and it is his extra-marital affair which drove her further to depression and desperation. The study further depicts that he never played the role of a 'nurse' which he demands but a hagman's that led her to commit suicide. The reading intends to show that 'Birthday Letters' is not a poetic statement of a sincere lover and an honest husband but a capricious, heartless and cruel man who cowardly wants to defend himself at the cost of his deceased wife. This is not fair. The travesty of truth is unveiled as the readers judge his false reasonings and arguments.

Keywords: *Psychopath, dumfounded, Electra complex, suicide, travesty*

Ted Hughes unlocks the most exciting chapter of his poetic career with the publication of his famous *Birthday Letters* (1998). It's an epoch-making book in modern literary history. Most of the poems are autobiographical in nature and confessional in mode. They deal with the poet's tempestuous relationship with his first wife and a creative genius herself, Sylvia Plath. The poems recount their relationship right from their first fateful meeting, through their courtship and marriage, their bitter sour conjugal life with their two children, to the suicide of Plath and the shock he received thereafter. The poems cover almost thirty-five years of his poetic life. Sylvia- Hughes myth continues to haunt the literary circle throughout decades and Hughes remains almost silent regarding their relationship till he decides to publish *Birthday Letters*.

But ironically enough, Hughes does not celebrate their love here but presents the dark, deep, dungeon of their feverish, fiery, agonized relationship. In the book we find no celebration of birthday, no good wishes for the departed soul of Plath, rather Hughes upholds her as a butt of bantering and ridicule. The poems seem to exert, painfully and laboriously, much emphasis to establish Plath as a neurotic and a psychopath, suffering from Electra complex which, according to Hughes's version, plagued their conjugal life. He seems more concerned to prove himself guiltless and innocence than to confess the truth behind the catastrophic end of their diseased relationship.

The very introductory poem 'Fulbright Scholars' unfolds the irony of Hughes malicious design. Or why does he taunt Plath by recalling her 'exaggerated American/ Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners.' Such presentation of her reveals not his applause but disdain and abhorrence for Plath. Then a few lines later Hughes sarcastically comments that he was 'dumfounded afresh' 'By his ignorance of the simplest things', suggesting that he was a fool to choose Plath as an innocent, simple girl. The metaphor of 'Was it then I bought a peach?' suggests his regret of buying a peach, a hard nut to break and thereby implying his regret of choosing Plath as a wife. The metaphor also hints at the Biblical anecdote of Eve's tasting the diabolical apple from the 'Tree of Knowledge' and their subsequent 'Fall'.

In the next poem 'Trophies' Hughes paints her in the bad light of having the instinct of panther, the most fatal beast of prey. The shocking description of their relationship is given thus:

The panther? It had already dragged you
As if in its jaws, across Europe.
.....
.....Its jungle prints
Hit your page. Plainly the blood
Was your own. With a laugh I
Took its full weight. Little did I know
The shock attack of a big predator.

(Trophies, *Birthday Letters*)

Such description of Plath is nothing but humiliation of her. His nausea and indignation for her, his blunt attack of her neurosis, her sexuality and her intense attraction for Hughes as possessiveness and Hughes's evasion further drove her to restlessness and depression. Instead of being a cure, the husband Hughes became a traitor of true love and thus strengthened her depression which quickened the process of her suicide. Reminiscences like these are nothing but a mockery of love. Neither a ladylove nor a beloved wife can expect to be addressed as a 'big predator' from her lover or husband.

'18 Rugby Street' is one of the famous poems in the sequence, popularly praised as a poem of love. But ironically, Hughes's description of their love making and his presentation of Plath belie its credit of being a love poem. Instead, a dreadful premonition was looming large upon the impending disaster that shortly happened. Hughes's embarrassment and discomfort became evident in his presentation of her. As the poet recounts the actions and behavior of Plath and paints a psychological trait of her mind, it gives the picture of a feverish, impulsive, panic-stricken and traumatic psychopath. She is compared to a great bird of prey at the moment of her love-making. The description of different parts of her body offers a chaotic picture of her soul:

And I became aware of the mystery

Of your lips, like nothing before in my life,
The aboriginal thickness. And of your nose,
Broad and Apache, nearly a boxer's nose,
Scorpio's obverse to the Semitic eagle
That made every camera of your enemy,
The jailer of your vanity, the traitor
In your Sexual Dreams Incorporated,
Nose from Attila's horde:
('18, Rugby Street', *Birthday Letters*)

From the very beginning Hughes shows his penchant to portray the spiritual and psychic chaos of Plath. Now the simple question comes: why did he fall in love? Or did he really fall in love? Did he love her? Or we may question, why did he marry her, for devil's sake, if he knew her as a psychopath suffering from Electra complex? Was not it treachery and betrayal enough for a man to one who depended on him entirely and loved him so passionately? Now we know that it was Hughes's extra-marital affair with Assia Weevil which is solely responsible for the fatal consequence of Plath's death and not her neurosis. She was never loved and simply deserted and thrown away by Hughes, 'dumfounded' to use his own words. Plath's own comment is a testimony to prove it. She said, with acute pain and bitterness,

"I found Ted has been building a secret London life all this summer-a flat, a separate bank account, this woman, who I am sure will now leave her ... husband & marry Ted," Plath wrote to her mother, Aurelia Plath, on Oct. 9, 1962, referring to Mr. Hughes' affair with Assia. "He gave me no time, no inkling, to make any plans of my own." She further wrote to her mother, "Ted and his woman ... have already wistfully started wondering why I didn't commit suicide, since I did before!" Plath wrote to her mother on Oct. 16, 1962. "Ted has said how convenient it would be if I were dead, then he could sell the house & take the children whom He likes. It is me he does not like." (Not surprisingly, the quotes from Plath's letters included here were edited out of *Letters Home*, a collection of Plath's letters to her mother; Mr. Hughes had final editorial control over that book.)¹

In the poem 'The Shot' Hughes paints her as a psychopath who suffers from Electra complex and never comes out of her father's shadow:

.....Your Daddy,
The god with the smoking gun. For a long time
Vague as mist, I 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.

('The Shot', *Birthday Letters*)

Does the account seem justified or should it be re-evaluated? Here Hughes seems to draw his bare sword to attack the shadow of Plath's long deceased father. Hughes said that he was hit. In fact, he hit her hard. If Plath had an emotional and mental problem, he should take her to the doctor. Instead, he drove her further towards darkness by taunting and ridiculing. In a way, Hughes made a crime against her by withdrawing his emotional support and attacking her instead which enhances the process of Plath's suicide. Herein lays the travesty of truth. When her father died Plath was a small child of eight years old. It is quite natural to have a strong emotional bond between a girl and a father who had died so early. Instead of supporting her emotionally, Hughes became a traitor of their love and crushed her to death. She could not bear the burden of betrayal and therefore took recourse to the ultimate decision of suicide. The poem 'The Shot', therefore, ironically unveils the whole truth that someone is shot and that was not Hughes, surely. It was Sylvia Plath who was shot and hit so hard that she failed to survive.

In the anthology Hughes makes us to believe that Plath was violent, crazy, possessive, and bitterly obsessive of her father and that is the main cause of their break up. In 'The Machine', he bluntly blames her and comments that 'The dark ate you. And the fear/ Of being crushed. 'A huge dark machine'.' Three other poems where Hughes violently attacks her Electra complex are 'God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark', 'The Table' and 'Being Christlike'. Hughes seems to exonerate himself of Sylvia's suicide by putting blame of her obsession with her father. Katha Pollitt rejects his claim when she comments,

"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. One starts to wonder what it means to blame a suicide on Fate, or on a father who died, after all, when Plath was 8 years old, or on "fixed stars."²

Mr. Hughes's version of her violence and craziness are too simple and childish to be trusted even by a layman. According to Hughes Plath became impulsive and neurotic due to her deep love for her dead father. Anything could trigger the memories of her father. Even the wood by which he made a desk for her, brings about the memory of her 'daddy'. 'With a plane/ I revealed a perfect landing pad/ For your inspiration', he writes in 'The Table', 'I did not/ Know I had made and fitted a door./ Opening downwards into your 'Daddy's grave'. As she recovers from her rage and impulsiveness, she poured forth her tempestuous emotions on Hughes. 'You were the jailor of your murderer./ Which imprisoned you', he writes in 'The Blackbird', ' And since I was your nurse and protector/ Your sentence was mine too.' Mr. Hughes said, being protector and nurse of her, he then 'hypnotized' her mad wife. He writes, 'Each night/ I hypnotized calm into you' Ironically, the poet and the husband forgot to mention that he did not bring her to doctor or soothe her to calm down her feverish emotion. Instead, he hypnotized her. Herein lies the hypocrisy and lies. And finally, the liability, not love, the lady gave up hope. She committed suicide. What a mockery of truth! Mr. Hughes never mentions of his affair with Assia Gutmann, the woman for whom Hughes had finally dumfounded her. The cause of death and the travesty of truth are revealed.

That Mr. Hughes proved himself a literary autocrat and an arbitral when he confessed of eliminating some of Plath's poems from *Ariel* manuscripts. He admitted that he eliminated "some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962."³ This undue liberty of tampering the text of *Ariel* poems can't be justified by any means but now we make out the reasons. He also admitted the same in his *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982), where he said that he destroyed the notebook that covers the last months of Plath's life and there he gave the reasons, "because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival)."⁴ What a reasoning! The evident fact is that he was afraid of truth – the truth of false love, treachery, betrayal and perversion of his own version of half-truth which he endeavoured to uphold so long. *Birthday Letters*, in fact, ironically reveals the truth which he wished so earnestly either to suppress or to pervert. Eighty eight poems of the anthology offers us the impression of a sincere and honest poet but a capricious, revengeful, angry and destructive Greek god who spares nothing that kneels before him and surrenders. *Birthday Letters* neither gives us good poetry, nor the confession of an honest husband.

Ian Sansom rightly observes when he said, 'Readers should not be fooled into thinking that *Birthday Letters*, for all its detailed and intense rendering of an extraordinary relationship, will tell them much more about it than they knew already'⁵ And rightly so, readers have already known the Sylvia-Hughes love-hate tragic tale where the deserted Sylvia took fatal recourse to suicide and Hughes marrying Assia Gutmann for whom he left Sylvia.

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