 Resource 3

Activities for further study of the poems after introduction of Plath/personal and political context.

Fulbright scholars

* A mood of benign nostalgia? How developed? Reflective but not nostalgic??? Meditative? A confessional but non-judgmental poem?
* First poem in collection: establishes chronological, historical, biographical, autobiographical sequencing. Why would Hughes do this?
* The poem is ‘a meditation upon the difficulty of attaining certain knowledge, perhaps especially about individuals and events with which we have been personally involved’ (Barry Spur article). Compare thoughts about memory and truth in this poem now that you know the personal, literary and historical context; does knowledge of the textual conversation change your reading of the poem?
* Vocabulary of uncertainty eg wondering, doubt
* What to make of gentle self-reproach in final lines? Older man looking back patronisingly on the younger man?
* Representation of Sylvia: disturbing portraiture? Xenophobic Englishman’s judgments? “Your exaggerated American/ Grin”. Focus on difference between affectation and reality. Note lexical chain of disguise – which is informed by later knowledge.
* Textual conversation with other Hughes poems: the representation of Sylvia as obscured, distant
* Textual conversation with readers (Plath supporters?) in “that’s as I remember”: is this an attempt to deflect criticism by acknowledging the shortcomings of memory?
* Read the poem aloud. Comment on soundscape. Why the predominance of ‘s’ sounds?
* Identify images and concepts to do with appearance vs reality; truth vs illusion
* Investigate Hughes’ representation of his first impressions: are there warning signs of what is to come? Is there a suggestion that their youthful impetuosity was to blame?

Fever

* ‘The burning woman’ as reference to Lady Lazarus’ self-description as a phoenix
* Examine retrospection: there are parts of the poem that are considered to have been written at/close to the events, and others that may have been written (much?) later. Can you tell which is which? To what extent does it matter?
* Hughes and symbolism: does ‘the fever’ represent mental illness?

The shot

* Note the paradoxical desire to return to her father and punish him for deserting her
* How does the pacing of the poem mirror her ricocheting “flightpath” through life?
* Textual conversation: echoing of motif from Fulbright about the disjoint between Plath’s public and private faces ‘hair done this way…’
* Explore the Electra Complex and the idea of Hughes as a daddy substitute
* Compliments vs criticisms and accusations of Hughes eg single-mindedness vs those she consumed in the process NB Plath in ‘Ariel’ describing herself: “And I / Am the arrow”. Textual Conversation with Plath’s arrow in Ariel, which represents the (romanticized?) path of the liberated woman. Why does Hughes employ the jarring contrast with the bullet?
* The repetition of “god” evokes Plath’s persistence in her quest
* Does Hughes have any sympathy for Plath in this poem? How does the ending make the responder feel about Hughes (before vs after the contextual details)?
* Summarise Hughes’ version of Plath’s psychology

Daddy

* Compare the biographical representation in the poem to the actual biography. Analyse the key differences and consider the/an artist’s use of biography and artistic decisions to incorporate/ extend/ exaggerate/ omit/ deviate from the personal context
* Analyse the ways in which Plath uses sound to create tone in this poem.
* Annotate the figurative devices used. Explain how each is used to build the ‘argument’ of the poem.
* Trace the characterisation of the father through the poem: how does the imagery position the reader to see the father at different points in the poem?
* Discuss the point at which the poem becomes about Hughes. How does Plath connect the two men? Examine the conversations with Fulbright Scholars, A and The Shot.

A picture of Otto

Further deconstruction and comparison:

* In most of ‘Birthday Letters’, ‘you’ refers to Sylvia Plath. Who does it refer to here? How can we tell?
* Look up the meaning of ‘manqué’. What does this imply about Hughes’ attitude to Otto Plath?
* Plath says ‘If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two’, and refers to Hughes as a “vampire”. How does Hughes’ imply that her issues with her father spilled over onto him (Hughes) until ‘she could hardly tell us apart in the end’ in both Picture of Otto and The Shot?
* The last stanza alludes to Wilfred Owen’s ‘dark poem’, ‘Strange Meeting’. Read that poem as a class and discuss the links between the two in terms of ideas, imagery and theme. How does Hughes this use intertextuality to add deeper meaning in his poem? How does this also create another textual conversation?
* How does A Picture of Otto suggest that Hughes has finally come to some accord with the memory of Otto Plath? Compare this with Plath’s emotional ending to ‘Daddy’

Lady lazarus

[Article of themes and allusions in Lady Lazarus](https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/a-close-reading-of-lady-lazarus)

* Is this poem a plea for help or a chilling foreshadowing of her eventual death?
* Do her continued allusions to herself as a Jew or victim of the Nazi holocaust throw greater light onto her psychological issues with her father, now that you’ve studied more of the poems? Where is it referenced in ‘Lady Lazarus’?
* How do the intertextual allusions (Bible & TS Eliot) add another layer of textual conversation?
* Are we part of ‘the peanut-crunching crowd’? How do we feel about that? Is Plath accusing us?
* How does this poem “converse” with ‘The Shot’, “Fulbright Scholars’ and ‘Daddy’ to deepen your understanding of all poems? (In the Journal entry give specific quotes and analysis to support your points)

Fever vs fever 103

* In which ways does Hughes’ poem respond to specific ideas in Plath’s poem? Give examples. How does he use this event (her fever) as a metaphor to explore their relationship as a whole?
* Then, each student adds to their own Google Docs by writing an analytical paragraph which answers the following question, supporting it with evidence from the two poems: In which ways does Hughes’ poem ‘Fever’ respond to and engage with the ideas in ‘Fever 103˚’ by Plath? When done, share these to the teacher for feedback/marking.

Nick and the candlestick

* How does the title’s allusion to the nursery rhyme “Jack be nimble” link to this poem? Contrast the light-hearted rhyme with the somber mood of much of this poem
* What is the mood set in the first 7 stanzas? How does it differ from the mood of the second half of the poem? Give quotes to show this.
* How does the extended metaphor of the cave, link ideas of the dark empty house Plath is actually walking through, with pregnancy and emotional crisis?
* Plath often used colour symbolically; blue was associated with pregnancy and motherhood, white with death, red with blood and life and yellow with moments of happiness. Revisit the poem and quote lines, commenting on how each uses these colours symbolically.
* Religious imagery is also visible in many of Plath’s poems. Identify the religious imagery and allusions in this poem and quote lines, explaining the effect of this imagery.
* How does the final metaphor of Nicholas as the “baby in the barn” show the positive light with which she views her son?
* Which poems does this one link with the best? Find specific lines or stanzas to support this.

Red

(Questions from the [Module weebly site](http://modatextualconversationshughesplath.weebly.com/))

* Explore the associations of “red”, “white”, “blood”, “dead” and “family bones” in stanza one. How do these relate to what has been said before about Plath’s relationship with her dead father?
* Comment on the effect of the alliteration and the repetition in this stanza.

In stanza two Hughes makes reference to Sylvia Plath’s decorations in their house in North Devon, the house where she was later to write the poems that made her famous.

In ‘Letters Home’ she writes to her mother that she intends to purchase a bright red patterned wall-to-wall carpet. She writes on 5 November 1961,‘I am so suggestible to colors (sic) and textures that I’m sure a red carpet would keep me forever optimistic’ (page 435). Later on 29 December 1961,‘the new red corduroy curtains I have just finished drawn, making the room bright and cheerful, like the inside of a Valentine’ (page 440).

We should remember this is the final months of Hughes and Plath’s living together. There was severe mental strain in their lives at this time which was not always visible to outsiders. In this poem Hughes again refers to the pain that lay beneath the surface representation that she revealed to the world.

He says that he, ‘felt it raw – like the crisp edges of a stiffening wound’.  
  
Hughes says that Plath had transformed their room into a ‘judgement chamber’, and in the last line of stanza two, an ‘Aztec altar – temple’.  
Read this stanza carefully, taking note of all the images in it and comment on Hughes’ representation of Sylvia Plath and the nature of their relationship.

By now it should be clear that the colour imagery is not a simple code that can be applied to specific events or experiences. It is a complex mixture and interaction of Sylvia Plath’s energetic and artistic life-force, her death wish to re-join her father, her fear of loneliness and feelings of rejection, her optimistic attempts to overcome her depression and her pessimistic drive towards suicide.

* Why does Hughes say that, ‘only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness’?
* Why does Hughes say that the ‘Salvias, that your father named after you’ are ‘Like blood lobbing from a gash’? Also comment on the appropriateness of the alliteration.
* Roses are often associated with romantic love and beauty. With this in mind, explain the last two lines of stanza two. Why ‘the heart’s last gouts’?
* Comment on the imagery in the seventh stanza. How are the colours red, white and blue used?

For Sylvia Plath blue was the symbol of motherhood.

Blue is generally regarded as a symbol of truth, the intellect, wisdom, loyalty, constancy and chastity. It is also the colour of the feminine principle and the Great Mother. These are things that interested Hughes profoundly and all his poetry since “Crow” has been influenced by this concept.

Hughes combines all these meanings in the final lines of the poem, a poem which could be regarded as his final letter of goodbye. Blue is described as something precious – a ‘jewel’.

The more gentle and affectionate tone in the last three stanzas, created mainly by the soft alliteration of the “c” sounds and the deliberate word choice, would seem to indicate a man who understands and cares. This, of course, is only one interpretation. Others might say that as he has had the last say, and because she is dead and has no right of reply, he is being dishonest in his representation of her and events in their lives.

* Why does Hughes say that, ‘Blue has wings’?

Hughes is describing Plath’s two selves – her divided self. If she was schizoid, as some would describe her, then it is possible to see this poem as a description of a split personality.

On the surface Sylvia Plath did give the impression of a busy housewife and poet getting on with her life (as her letters to her mother and meetings with friends indicate), but underneath all that there was this terrible despair where, ‘In the pit of red you hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.’

* What exactly is it that she has hidden from? This is a complex image but is consistent with the imagery in the other poems set for study.
* Explain the meaning of the final line of the poem.

The sad finality of the last line brings to an end what has been an agonised and tormented story. Hughes is finally shutting the book that has been, ‘only a story. Your story. My story.’

* The poem contains much lush, dense, tactile imagery, relying for its effect on a combination of alliteration and assonance as well. It is a poem that largely achieves its effect through its powerful physicality. Remembering that this is the final poem that he wrote about Sylvia Plath, why do you think Hughes has concluded his letters with this representation of her?

Annotated red colour mind map

(from [Diagrams of Red](https://getrevising.co.uk/diagrams/red))

A Birthday Present

* Steve masters has written:  
  ‘By writing A Birthday Present first during this month it is as though Plath was attempting to convince herself that this was the best thing she could do for herself. By putting it down in writing she was able to release the gush of poetry that followed. Up to now the veil that hides what is beyond death has caused some turmoil. Even though she had attempted suicide about ten years previous, she had in many ways found aspects of life that seemed to try to keep her on this side of the veil. But now the decision has been made. There is no more struggle. It doesn’t matter if what is behind the veil is ‘ugly’ or ‘beautiful,’ It doesn’t matter whether it is rough or smooth. She somehow knows that, ‘it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want.’
* Is this view supported, in your opinion, by the text of the poem?
* Trace the persona’s self-representation in this poem. What poetic devices are used to self-represent? What is the tone at each point?
* How does the poet represent what draws her to, and what keeps her from, suicide?
* Argue for alternative readings of the poem i.e.it is not about wanting death.

A Birthday Present – points to note/ for student annotations:

* This was the first poem Plath wrote during the prolific month of September 1962 about 6 months before she committed suicide. Some critics see this poem as evidence of her decision to take her own life, and argue that this decision goaded her on and liberated her to write more prolifically. This group of poems may therefore have been both the cause and result of her decision to commit suicide.
* “With her perfectionism and her ruthless zeal to excel in every activity, Sylvia had always put herself under the greatest possible pressure. When she was lashing herself forward, the idea of suicide could work as an extra goad.” (Hayman, 132)
* When discussing the meaning of the ‘veil’ students could compare to Hamlet’s ‘Tobe or not to be’ soliloquy with its references to the “undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns, puzzles the will/ And makes us rather bear those ills” etc
* Is there evidence in the poem that she has made a firm decision to kill herself?
* Describe/discuss the tone of the poem, especially the self-mocking moments in the kitchen
* The ‘black eye-pits’ refer to Plath having worn herself out trying to be perfect. Discuss the contextual social norms of being a woman in the 1960s that are referred to in the poem:

‘A woman who went to college between 1945 and 1960, [Betty] Friedan concludes, ‘could hardly avoid learning ‘ not to get interested, seriously interested in anything besides getting married and having children, if she wanted to be normal, happy, adjusted, feminine.’ (Bennett, 102)

‘This is what Sylvia Plath tried to do, but somehow knew she could not, and would never be able to do. Like most women in the 1950s, Sylvia Plath appears to have accepted the basic assumptions of this doctrine or ideology even though she knew that in many respects they ran counter to the springs of her own nature.’(Bennett, 103)

By dedicating herself to committing suicide she freed herself from this principle; this need to adhere ‘to rules, to rules, to rules.’

* The ‘gift’ given to her since her last attempt may well be the inspiration and freedom to write more.
* Explore Plath’s two selves in this poem: where is the self that struggles to keep her from suicide? Does this divided self align with Hughes’ descriptions of her as having a split personality?
* Betty Friedan describes the late fifties and early sixties for American women as a ‘comfortable concentration camp’ -- physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished.’(Davison, 131) Describe Plath’s sense of entrapment in this poem. Do you agree that her decision to kill herself results at least in part from a sense that she is being killed anyway?

‘The passage of time has made it more apparent that Sylvia’s suicide was no irrelevant accident. Though she repeatedly used the imagery of death and rebirth, we can’t infer that she had some crazy belief that she could survive suicide. The right question is whether the literary flirtation with death could – by serving as a safety valve – have saved her life.’ (Hayman, 130) Do you agree? Do you think – based on the poems set for study – that Hughes would agree?

* ‘A birthday present was her way of saying to herself that she alone would have to make the decision to kill herself. And she used the poem to convince herself that she was allowing herself to be killed little by little anyway. Why not do it all at once, making it ‘pure and clean as the cry of a baby,’ because to allow herself to be killed by pieces would mean that once the present of death did come she would be, ‘to numb to use it.’ (Steve Masters)

Do you agree with this analysis?

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