 Resource 4

Resources for module A – Hughes and Plath unit

The ‘Big Ideas Blog’ (BIB)

Here are the 6 Big Ideas that can be used to link the module concepts. These are intended as a starting point for module revision and exam essay preparation. They have been woven into the unit learning activities at key junctures but should be revisited as often as possible.

If the teacher and class are that way inclined, they can be used as the ‘streams’ in a class blog (hence the BIB idea, the Big Ideas Blog), with students encouraged to upload at least one entry to each blog stream during the course of the unit.

Big idea #1

What are the issues involved with reading an artist’s work as biography?

Here, the textual conversation between Plath and Hughes can reveal more about their lives, or it can reveal the limitations of confusing composer with persona. What evidence is there that Plath and/or Hughes intend their poems to be taken as biography? What techniques do they use to support or resist this idea?

Big Idea #2

Is this textual conversation only understandable through the lens of biography? Is it a problem if biographical context is so critical to meaning?

A ‘textual conversation’ implies a permeable text; it is not possible to see the text as sealed off from responses and from its context. Think about what attracts us to different kinds of texts that depend to differing degrees on an awareness of the context of composition.

Big Idea #3

How have various groups viewed the textual conversation between Plath and Hughes? What is the effect of a ‘reading’ of a textual conversation? What do special interest groups or readings ‘do’ to the poems in order to make them fit their position?

Big Idea #4

Is The Birthday Letters really ‘slight’ as Hughes has suggested? Or, is it a carefully constructed representation as explanation/ justification/ self-defence/ honouring? Is it an act of love or spite? What evidence is there for the two views: organic, confessional, personal, unvarnished vs carefully constructed for the public. See the review of The Birthday Letters in The Independent for the case against seeing The Birthday Letters as self-defence or PR exercise.

Big idea #5

Inter-personal vs intra-personal vs inter-textual conversations? Examine the ways in which the two collections of poems function as all three of these possibilities. Are there other types of textual conversation?

Big Idea #6

Explore textual conversations and Reader Response Theory (including the idea of ‘the death of the author’). What is the significance of the fact that exploring intertextuality breaks down the notion of stable, fixed, sealed textual meaning?