



## Unit AS 1: Section A

# The Study of Poetry 1900-Present

## Plath and Hughes

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

### **A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication**

*In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.*

*This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.*

### **Themes**

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore their pair of poets. It reflects some of the thematic issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realizing for example that a particular poem is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

### **Death**

With Plath's mania, depression and suicide, many critics view her work as an autobiographical account of her morbid fixation with death. Similarly Hughes' work has been overshadowed by what many saw as his contribution to Plath's death, and his *Birthday Letters* collection has been seen as an attempt to absolve himself from the accusations. However, such biographical approaches are limiting and can lead to overlooking the way both poets offer a multifaceted exploration of death. Both poets consider death from a range of perspectives - as the result of war and genocide, or of man's own destruction in a hostile and aggressive world, or as a more personal reflection on the experience of loss and grief.



In his introduction to the poetry of Keith Douglas, Hughes remarked that “Life for all its desirability, is ultimately futile and the living are hardly more than deluded variants of the dead.” This dispassionate view of death is characteristic of Hughes’ approach in many poems where he explores the material reality of death, portraying it as an inevitable part of life. In *‘Relic’*, the speaker considers the jawbone he finds, a remnant of the living organism washed up on the shore along with other sea creatures which ‘turn to a crust/Continue the beginning’. The jawbone is a physical symbol of death both in its predatory nature, consuming other creatures, and as a ‘cenotaph’. The cycle of life is referred to dispassionately ‘Jaws/eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the beach’, and simply noted as a process of eating, death and decomposition. The plain, direct language adds to the detached attitude of the speaker, who casually observes the way the predator has now become part of the sequence - ultimately death where ‘None grow rich’ is the great equaliser.

Similarly Plath explores the physical reality of death in her poem ‘Contusion’ where the speaker’s description of a body, most likely a recent corpse, hints at the violence of death. The ‘dull purple’ flooding to the place of injury suggests a bruise, and contrasts with the paleness of the body. The use of a third-person speaker adds to the objectivity and sense of hopelessness. However, unlike Hughes’ images the complex metaphors do not offer any fixed definition: the sea sucking on rock, a fly crawling down a wall perhaps point to the isolation and loneliness of death. Death is presented as a finality in the closing stanza ‘The heart shuts,/The sea slides back,/The mirrors are sheeted’ - all suggesting death as an ending emotionally and physically.

Despite the pessimistic view of death that is expressed in ‘Contusion’, other poems by Plath offer a positive reflection on death, portraying it as a desirable means of escape from the demands of life. In poems such as ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Ariel’ death has a transformative power where the speaker experiences a phoenix-like rebirth. ‘Ariel’ describes an exhilarating horse ride at dawn. The female rider, hurtling through the air, asserts that she is an ‘arrow,/The dew that flies/Suicidal at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning’. The ending here has a positive tone – it is self-affirming and indicates the sense of power wielded as the speaker moves forward. The metaphor suggests self-destruction in that the delicate ‘dew’ drop will likely be burned up by the bright sun; however the fact that it is set at dawn implies a new beginning, moving positively towards the light.

Death is also explored as the outcome of war and violence, highlighting the darker aspects of human nature. This is expressed in Hughes’ use of the archetypal figure of the crow in *‘Crow Sickened’*. In his *Crow* collection the bird represents many aspects of Creation: at times he is a trickster figure, a survivor and scavenger, good and evil combined, the duality of man. (See <http://ann.skea.com/Trickstr.htm> for further reading). In ‘Crow Sickened’ the crow challenges death but it leads to his own awareness of his mortality. The combined metaphor and simile of ‘unwinding the world like a ball of wool’ and finding the ‘last end tied round his own finger’ suggests that man’s knowledge and reasoning is a dead end leading to a confrontation with his own inner nature. ‘Whatever walked into his ambush/Was always his own body’ hints at the violence of man, entrapped by his own arrogance: his ambition has led to his own self-destruction. This exploration of human violence and death continues in ‘Hawk Roosting’, where the predatory bird’s contemplation of the world represents the mind of a killer.

Plath too, is interested in the destructiveness of humanity, as is evident in her war and Holocaust references. In ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ the bee-keeper represents the



mind of the autocrat as s/he contemplates the box. At first the bees are described as dangerous but later are compared to 'exploited African hands', suggesting their slave-like existence. What the speaker fears is their collective power if freed: 'like a Roman mob, / Small, taken one by one, but my God, together!' The speaker acknowledges a god-like power over the bees: they can be sent back, relinquishing power over them, or killed by not feeding them. In the end the decision is made: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free."

Many of Plath's and Hughes' poems offer a more subjective reflection on death. Both Plath and Hughes avoid over-sentimentality, instead expressing the raw emotion felt. 'Daddy' and other poems of Plath figure a dominant father apparition who haunts and controls the living, lurking in the background and constantly casting a shadow over the speaker. While many of the elements of 'Daddy' have an autobiographical reference, the patriarchal figure has been mythologised.

Hughes also explores the influence of Plath's father-figure in 'The Picture of Otto' where the speaker is haunted by Plath's fixation. "I was a whole myth too large to replace you."

In *Birthday Letters* Hughes offered a reflection on his relationship with Plath and, as in some of the poems of Thomas Hardy, the speaker is haunted by the lingering presence of his dead wife. In 'Daffodils' the speaker directly addresses her: 'Remember how we picked the daffodils?' recalling a real-life experience where the couple picked the spring flowers and sold them to the grocer, but he is ever mindful of the distance between him and the subject and that she is gone: 'He would die in the same great freeze as you... Never guessed they were a last blessing'. The 'frailty' of the cut daffodils symbolises the fragile nature of the relationship which was similarly cut short. The fact that the flowers return every year is a positive affirmation of the cycle of life; however the flowers do not remember her. The final image of the poem is the rusty scissors which resembles an 'anchor' or 'cross'. Like the speaker, the scissors do remember her, perhaps suggesting the weight of his loss.

## Nature and man's relationship with the natural world

Nature is a central theme to Hughes' work, as is evident with the titles of numerous collections, such as *Hawk in the Rain* and *Crow*, which demonstrate the poet's tendency to draw inspiration from the natural world. Biographers link this interest to his rural upbringing in the Calder Valley and childhood fascination with the world of animals, commenting on the way in which his interest in nature influenced Plath's poetry. Heaney recognised that Hughes' poems were 'reminders that we are all part of the same fabric woven out of and into the palpable mysterious universe.' (Address given at Hughes' Memorial Service (<http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/1999/may/16/featuresreview.review2>)). Both Hughes and Plath explore man's connection to the natural world but it is not an idyllic depiction of a pastoral harmony with nature; instead it highlights the tensions between man and the natural world. Hughes' poems often present a Darwinistic view of nature as a powerful and violent force. Plath shows an ambivalent attitude towards nature. At times she views it as an indifferent and uncaring entity that refuses to offer comfort or an escape from the bleak reality of her speakers' situations as in 'Poppies in July'. In other poems nature mirrors the speaker's emotional state: the sense of dejection in 'Sheep in Fog', the speaker's wild sense of freedom in 'Ariel'.



The contention between man and nature is evident in poems such as Hughes' 'Wind' and Plath's 'Tulips' where the domestic interior world of man is juxtaposed with the power of the natural world. 'Tulips' is set in a sterile hospital environment where nature, represented by the tulips, disturbs the trance-like stasis of the speaker. The flowers are described with ominous undertones; they are 'too excitable', they 'hurt' and 'should be behind bars like dangerous animals'. But they offer hope, their bright red colour, linked to life and love, forcing the speaker towards an acknowledgement of her existence. In 'Wind' the savage power of elemental forces attacks the house in a violent storm that has its inhabitants cowering 'in front of the great fire'. In other poems such as 'Hawk Roosting' there are parallels drawn between the ruthlessness of nature and the inherent violence of man.

While many poems like 'Wind' and 'Pike' (both by Hughes) express the violence of nature, showing the speaker's appreciation of its imposing wildness, others offer a more serene appreciation of the beauty of nature. In Hughes' 'Roe-deer' the speaker has a dawn encounter with two deer and expresses the beauty of the moment as the two species regard each other. The deer have traversed into the domain of man, 'into my dimension', suggesting the divide between man and nature. The fact that 'the deer were waiting for me/To remember the password and sign' suggests that a primal connection between man and the natural world has been lost. Momentarily the speaker unites with nature as the road disappears but the surreal meeting ends as the deer vanish into the snow and the speaker returns 'Back to the ordinary'.

Plath's 'The Night Dances' similarly expresses a concern with man's lost connection with the natural world. In the poem a mother watches her toddler child at night in his cot. The child is described in terms of nature, 'drenched grass', 'lilies, lilies', 'comets' and snowflakes, equating the innocence of the child to the purity of nature. Yet the imagery also suggests the impermanence of the connection: age brings 'forgetfulness', the 'black amnesia of heaven', and the child will lose itself to 'mathematics': the mysterious wonder of nature and the universe will be lost to rational thinking.

## The Self

"What is Hughes' interest in animals but an attempt to express the submerged life in himself? And what is Plath's probing of the psyche but a search for the instinctual and elemental qualities of her nature?" (Margaret Dickie Uroff: *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, University of Illinois Press 1979) Uroff's comment points to the deeply psychological nature of the work of Plath and Hughes, the search for the self through the means of poetry. Hughes writes less about his own subconscious and more about the collective unconscious, the myths that shape our lives and our wider knowledge of our place in the universe. Plath as a Confessional poet is interested in bringing the suppressed aspects of the individual to the surface using personal details in her poetry as a means of self-expression, but it is important to recognise the way in which her poetry is able to transcend the Confessional style and offer a more universal reflection on the female subconscious and raise questions regarding female self-hood.

Plath's concern with the self is perhaps most notable in 'Mirror' where the mirror is a symbol of the female search for identity and is used to raise the issue of pressures on women. In the poem the woman uses the mirror 'searching my reaches for what she really is', indicating the female quest to seek the truth about her own identity, and her dependence on this confirmation of her identity is evident in the fact that she



returns to view it every morning. However that identity is tied up with the superficial ideal of youth and beauty, and as she ages there are 'tears and an agitation of hands' - repelled by what she sees. The poem expresses the conflict between outer appearances and inner consciousness.

Similar issues of self and identity are explored in 'Lady Lazarus' where the female speaker with her 'face a featureless, fine/Jew linen' peels off the layers to strip before a masculine 'peanut crunching crowd'. Plath highlights the objectification of women; however, because of the condensed use of metaphors the true self of the female speaker remains hidden and obscured under layers of meaning. Like many of Plath's female speakers, she seeks death and rebirth, finding a new identity from her resurrection.

Psychoanalytical theory can also be applied to many of Plath's poems. In several poems, particularly 'Daddy', Plath conflates the father and husband figure, the poet herself acknowledging that she was writing about a girl with an Electra complex. Freudian theories regarding the id (the unconscious, instinctual part of the psyche) and the ego (the conscious part of the self that experiences and interacts with the outside world) can be applied to the 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', where the dark box full of angry bees which the speaker is attracted to ('I can't keep away from it./ There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there') perhaps represents the darker suppressed aspects of the speaker's subconscious.

Hughes' critics link the poet's work to both Freud and Jung, commenting on the way in which he is fascinated with the self, not as personal enquiry into the subconscious, but as an object in a larger world. 'The Thought-Fox', a poem about the creative mind, describes an escape from the consciousness of the speaker. The fox is not real, but a vivid, imaginary, magical presence conjured by the speaker entering the imagination. As the fox is described the poet seems to disappear, losing a sense of himself and accessing the spirit world through the animal. In 'Wodwo' Hughes similarly uses a mythical creature, a 'half man half animal spirit of the forest' to explore the inner primitive instincts of humans free of constraints. The frequent questions at the start of the poem 'What am I?' show the speaker's quest for self-knowledge. As the poem progresses the use of formal rules of punctuation and grammar are relaxed, producing a stream-of-consciousness narrative that mirrors the creature's release from restrictions of civilisation.

## Relationships

Several of the poems of Plath and Hughes consider the broad theme of relationships. Within the poems selected for CCEA, both poets portray the ambivalent and often negative emotions of the complex, and at times dysfunctional relationship between parent and child, and the emotional vulnerability and pain of couples.

In 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' Hughes offers perhaps the most positive depiction of the relationship between father and child. The poem is addressed to Frieda, Hughes' daughter who would have been a toddler at the time the poem was written. 'Moon! you cry suddenly, 'Moon! Moon!' The childlike innocence of the toddler is captured in the simple speech of the little girl who marvels at the sight of the moon. In the final lines the speaker similarly appreciates the wonder of creation in the form of Frieda: 'The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing amazed at a work/That points at him amazed.' There are parallels with Plath's 'The Night Dances' where the child's



innocence creates a connection with the natural universe that has been subsequently lost.

The negative aspects of the bond between father and daughter is a theme which figures in many of Plath's poems, most noticeably 'Daddy' where the father-figure is an ominous presence overshadowing the daughter. Many critics link this to Plath's obsession with her father, who died when she was eight. The speaker describes her father as 'a black shoe/In which I have lived like a foot/For thirty years', suggesting the suffocating constraint he has exercised on her life. The speaker attempts to create an identity for herself but despite her attempted rejection of his control in the declaration 'I'm through', there is an obsessive attraction to the figure that cannot easily be escaped.

Several poems deal with the nature of romantic relationships, depicting the turbulent relationship between men and women. Several of Plath's poems express feminist concerns, with 'Lady Lazarus' and other poems alluding to the victimisation and objectification of women, and characters assuming a feminist power to challenge the dominant male oppressors of the poems. At times the relationship is more ambivalent, as in 'The Colossus', or 'Tulips' where the female speaker is distant from her husband and child and wishes to be freed from her roles as wife and mother, rejecting the stereotypical roles laid out for her.

Many of Hughes' later poems are intensely personal and often linked to his tempestuous relationship with Plath. In 'Lovesong' the poet writes about the way in which the initial passion descends into a bitter conflict that damages both parties. The first verse captures the raw passion of the beginning of the relationship, described in straightforward terms: 'He loved her and she loved him'. The all-consuming physical nature of their union is evident in the lines 'He had no other appetite...She wanted him complete inside her'. Yet it is also a violent passion as 'She bit him', a reference to their first kiss. Plath describes the encounter in her diary 'and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hair band off...And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face.' In 'Lovesong' the union quickly descends into a violent conflict, 'looks nailed down his hands', 'His whispers were whips' and the metaphorical references to locks, traps and knots suggest the constricting nature of relationships. In the conclusion of the poem the relationship has become a grotesque tearing apart with skulls opened and sinews and eyes pulled out. Yet despite the mutilation the two are 'entwined' asleep and have taken 'each other hostage' suggesting that they are wrapped up together physically and emotionally, and cannot escape easily despite the wounds suffered.



## A02: Poetic methods

*In this examination, the candidate should analyse the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. This AO is the driver of Unit AS 1: Section A and is of primary importance.*

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic features such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these features relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

### 1. The poetic feature should be:

**Identified**, using appropriate terminology if possible. (It should not be necessary for the student to learn or research recondite terms; the more well-known terms should be sufficient at this stage, provided they are used accurately);

**Illustrated**, - as this is an “open book” section, quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student's own words;

**Analysed** so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect; and

**Related** to the key term of the question.

### 2. Use of the terms “image” and “imagery”

For our purposes in this unit “images” and “imagery” are to be sought and found in the language of the poems, and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as “In this poem the reader has the image of nature as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this unit, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

### 3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet's words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. This feature, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

**Identified** - here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);



**Illustrated** - a full and apt quotation should be selected;

**Analysed** - the quotation should be analysed so as to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved: and

**Related** to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterization or development) should be understood by students.

## Poetic Voice

A study of any poem should first consider the poetic voice, the character from whose perspective the poem is delivered, the tone, attitudes, ideas, thoughts and feelings expressed by the speaking presence. At times the speaker can be closely aligned to the poet's own identity, particularly where details have an autobiographical reference. However it is important to recognise that the speaker is a device used by poets, and serves a similar purpose to the narrator in a novel. In the poetry of Hughes and Plath, both writers make extensive use of poetic personae, with the majority of poems in this selection using a first-person perspective. With Plath's work that perspective is often female, exploring feminist concerns regarding the role of women.

The detached, objective observer is evident in several of Hughes poems. Like 'Wind', 'Pike' begins with a third-person description of nature, noting the details of the fish's features, its length, colour and natural instinct as a killer. Yet the language suggests a covert appreciation of the fish with phrases such as 'perfect', 'gold' and 'grandeur' signifying the speaker's awe of the pike's savage beauty. The first-person perspective becomes more apparent in the last four stanzas where the speaker expresses a nightmarish fear of what is under the surface of the pond as he recognises its inherent malevolence. Note the contradictory language of the speaker: 'That past nightfall I dared not cast/But silently cast and fished', and his oxymoronic description of the 'still splashes' on the pond. The final stanza employs the surreal image of 'Owls hushing the floating woods.' There is a deeply psychological aspect to this poem with the water perhaps representing the human psyche and the 'Darkness beneath' the surface the darker aspects of humanity and man's heritage of violence. Similarly in 'Mirror' the persona of the mirror appears detached and objective. Its simple direct statements, 'I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions' and claims of truthfulness attest to this. However the details in the second stanza contradict these assertions as it describes how the woman 'turns to those liars, the candles or the moon' and how the young pretty girl has morphed into 'an old woman...like a terrible fish', the water imagery of the lake representative of the female consciousness.

The adoption of a persona is a device used frequently by both poets. In 'Hawk Roosting' for example Hughes presents a hawk's view of the world, using the bird of prey to comment on mankind's self-importance and exploitative nature. The arrogance of the bird is evident in the first few stanzas as he roosts on the top of the trees, looking down on the rest of the world beneath him: he egotistically notes how the air and the sun 'Are of advantage to me;/And the earth's face upward for my inspection.' His arrogant claim that 'I hold Creation in my foot' suggest a god-like domination over lesser beings. The abrupt end-stopped lines of the poem reinforce the hawk's cold, sharp tone. In his all-powerful position he has the power of life and death, 'tearing off heads' and the 'allotment of death'. In the final stanza the hawk



resolves to permit 'no change' and 'keep things like this' maintaining his control and power, perhaps a symbol of the megalomaniac attitudes of political leaders.

Several poems clearly have an addressee or an implied listener. In 'The Colossus' the female speaker addresses the massive statue she has been maintaining for thirty years. In the opening line she acknowledges 'I shall never get you put together entirely', admitting defeat in her life's work of reconstructing the monument. She has been devoted to caring for it, clearing the silt and weeds from its throat and brow, and the speaker describes herself 'like an ant' in contrast to the massive statue with its 'great lips', the 'acres of [its] brow' and the 'immense skull-plates'. The statue overshadows the speaker, with many critics reading this as a father-figure whose ruins dominate the speaker as she is compelled to tend to it despite the futility of the labour. Other critics see the colossus as perhaps an expression of the speaker's frustrations with patriarchal oppression in society and literature. The speaker contradictorily despises the sculpture, mocking its animal sounds and pretensions as an oracle, yet glorifies it and has abandoned the real world to care for it.

## Imagery

Both Hughes and Plath's work is characterised by the poets' extensive use of imagery, at times disturbing and grotesque and at others beautiful and sensual, providing insight into the human condition at personal and universal level. This imagery is drawn from the natural world, religion, war, the cosmos, classical and archetypal mythology to convey the malevolent and nurturing aspects of nature or the confused and bleak mental states of individuals.

## Metaphor

In her work, Plath uses metaphor extensively, often using the device to reflect the complex emotional states of her female speakers and their sense of identity. In 'Ariel' the speaker boldly declares 'I/Am the arrow' expressing her female power and sense of direction as she flies through the air. In other poems the metaphors express the objectification of women: in 'Lady Lazarus' the speaker is a 'walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade'. The disturbing image of a light shining through skin and the Holocaust references suggest the bodily victimization and exploitation of the speaker. In 'Tulips' she is a 'thirty year old cargo boat' only important as a carrier vessel, the metaphor suggesting her emotional despondency and ambivalent attitude towards her duties as wife and mother. A similar sense of hopelessness is expressed in 'Sheep in Fog' where the bleak winter landscape is a metaphor for the speaker's sense of desolation. At the beginning of the poem the 'Hills step off into whiteness': the landscape is personified to convey the sense of loneliness and isolation of the scene. The language is suggestive of a suicidal leap into nothingness, the scene devoid of all vitality and vibrancy. The 'stillness' that the speaker's bones hold anticipates a death 'starless and fatherless, a dark water.' The negative suffix of 'less' and the metaphor of the 'dark water' suggest the emptiness and lack of solace or peace in the imagined afterlife.

Many of Hughes' poems use metaphors linked to animals and nature in order to express the poet's views about the natural world and man's place within it. In 'Wind' the metaphors contrast the vulnerability of man with the savage power of natural forces. The image of the house that has been 'far out at sea all night' compares the



house to a foundering ship, isolated from civilization. In contrast the winds have been 'stampeding the fields', the metaphor suggestive of a brutal uncontrollable energy that is so powerful it even rearranges the landscape. At times metaphors reflect the beauty and wildness of nature, as in 'Pike' where the fish's camouflage is described as 'green tigering the gold', the tiger references suggesting the graceful predatory instinct of the pike, with 'gold' picking up on the tawny colour of both the tiger and the fish and also suggesting its majestic beauty. Metaphor is the dominant feature of 'Lovesong', where a series of violent metaphors is used to describe the antagonistic relationship between male and female. At first 'His smiles were the garrets of a fairy palace/ Where the real world would never come' suggesting the romantic, highly unrealistic nature of the relationship as it began, with the 'garrets' foreshadowing it as confining and restrictive. The metaphors suggest a military conflict, a battle over possession 'His words were occupying armies' and 'Her laughs were an assassin's attempts', with the battle unresolved in the final stanza where the couple's initial captivation has turned into an obsession ('took each other hostage') that has enslaved and imprisoned both.

## Symbolism

It is important to consider the symbolic significance of recurring motifs in the work of Plath and Hughes, and the way in which particular images take on a variety of possible meanings.

**Colour:** Plath's use of colour is a vivid aspect of her poetry. Red for her is a female colour, often positive and linked to life and rebirth. In 'Tulips' the bright red flowers' 'excitable' colour contrasts with the white sterility of the hospital and reminds the speaker of her heart. In other poems such as 'Poppies in July', 'Ariel' and 'Lady Lazarus' the fiery red colour evokes life and rebirth. In 'Blackberrying' the red juices of the fruit stain the speaker's fingers, creating a 'blood sisterhood' and perhaps symbolising menstruation. White often suggests death and non-existence: in 'Contusion' the body is the colour of pearl, in 'Tulips' the clinical whiteness symbolises the speaker's emotional ennui. The barren whiteness of the mist in 'Sheep in Fog' symbolises the speaker's bleak outlook. References to bones and skulls also feature in Hughes' work, suggestive of the inevitability of death. Black is a predominant colour in both Hughes and Plath's writing. For Plath, black is a masculine colour associated with dominating males, particularly in 'Daddy' where the repetition of black gives the father-figure a sinister appearance which is repeated in the husband-figure: 'A man in black with a Meinkampf look'. It also links to the subconscious self, the unknowable aspects of the human psyche and 'the black amnesia of heaven'. In several poems it links to decay, death and mourning: for example in 'Colossus' the 'black cypress' trees are a classical Greek symbol of death and mourning. Hughes use of 'dark' is recurrent and as in Plath is symbolic of the deeper consciousness of man and the savagery contained in the darker part of the human psyche.

**Animals:** Both poets use animals figuratively – numerous animals and insects are referred to and are the symbolic subject of several poems. Animal mythology is a significant feature of Hughes work; animals are often predators, representative of the dark unknown forces governing mankind, hinting at suppressed instincts. Hughes for example uses birds as a symbol of man's primitive nature, and this has the effect of dehumanising man, highlighting his natural brutality. The mythic symbol of Crow for example represents humankind's multifaceted personality, while the Hawk more simply reflects his arrogance and exploitation of nature. Bird imagery occurs less



frequently in Plath's poems; but in 'Blackberrying' the black crows crow against the speaker's collecting the fruit, perhaps representing the male objection to the creative outlet of female writers.

**Water and Sea:** The poems of both Plath and Hughes frequently contain images and references to sea and water. With Plath often the water imagery is connected with the idea of death, with regular allusions to drowning and sinking. In 'Mirror' the young girl's obsession with her appearance has led to a metaphorical drowning in the depths of the mirror like Narcissus. In Hughes sea/water references suggest a Darwinistic view of life and death and the power of nature as in 'The Relic', 'Wind' and 'Pike'.

**Flowers:** In their 'flower' poems both Plath and Hughes personify the flowers, suggesting their connection with life. In 'Tulips' the flowers' exuberance brings the speaker out of her death-like trance. Comparing them to an 'awful baby./Their redness talks to my wound', the speaker tells how they remind her of her heart, forcing her to return to life. In 'Poppies in July' the speaker is attracted to the flowers for their ability to dull her senses. The poppies are 'clear red, like the skin of a mouth./A mouth just bloodied./Little bloody skirts!' the speaker's frustration evident in her language as they refuse to offer their drugging power. In 'Daffodils' Hughes describes the flowers as possessing a feminine delicacy with their 'girlish dance-frocks' and 'Ballerinas too early for music' suggestive of a premature relationship perhaps too hasty and impulsive to develop properly.

## Language and Sound

Hughes' poetry is characterised by its rough-hewn nature; often blunt and alliterative, it could be described as guttural and harsh, adapted to portray the severity of the primal forces of nature. This is evident in 'Wind' where the poet uses onomatopoeia extensively ('crashing', 'booming', 'bang') to convey the ferocity of the elemental force as it assaults nature itself and this is reinforced in the alliteration, for example 'a black-/Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly' where the repetition of the 'b' sounds highlight the intensity of the wind as it bends everything in its path.

Bluntness of language is also a feature of 'The Relic' where the repetitive pared-down language reflects the impartial observations of the speaker 'And the jaws,/ Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose/Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws/Eat and are finished' Note the simplicity of the language here: the use of monosyllabic words and the brief and syntactically crude descriptions of the cycle of feeding as emphasised by the repetition of 'jaws' and 's' sounds. This reductive use of language is a feature of some of Plath's work too, for example in 'Ariel' where the brevity of language hastens the pace of the poem and reflects the speaker's speed. The speaking presence of 'Mirror' also uses short, direct statements ('I am silver and exact') as appropriate to its detached objectivity and precision, which contrast with the figurative embellishments in the second stanza. Neologisms created through the hyphenation of particular words occur in 'Roe-deer' and 'Daffodils' where the word combinations shorten the poetic line and intensify the description. Words such as 'blue-dark' capture at once the dawn setting, vividly describing the bluish tint of the deer in the semi-darkness before sunrise.

This directness of language contrasts with vagueness in other poems. For example in 'The Thought-Fox' the non-specific language of the 'something' suggests the formation of a thought as it begins with an indefinite idea and then moves to



something more concrete in the symbol of the fox. The fox begins to take shape: 'A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;/Two eyes serve a movement, that now/And again now' starting with the nose and then the eyes. Here the syntactical economy of the line mirrors the tentative movements of the fox as it noses its way into the imagination.

Plath's use of negatives in her poetry is a small but important detail that features in many of her poems and often suggests her speaker's emptiness and emotional dejection. In 'Blackberrying' the speaker states there is 'Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries' setting the scene of her isolation in the desolate road as she seeks the sea 'somewhere'. In 'Colossus' the speaker states, 'No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel' hinting at her rejection of the real world. In 'Sheep in Fog' the 'Starless and fatherless' afterlife is devoid of any comfort.

Finally it is important to consider the rhythms used by both poets. Some poems have a conversational style, with a narrative quality that is like the rhythms of natural speech as in poems like 'Blackberrying' or 'Daffodils'. In 'Wind', Hughes' use of iambic stresses highlights the forces of nature. The repetitive nursery-like rhythms of 'Daddy' ('An engine, an engine,/Chuffing me off like a Jew') combining with the childlike simplicity of the language highlight the daughter's juvenile fixation with the father-figure yet jar uncomfortably with the holocaust references and nightmarish visions in the poem.

## Form and Structure

In the study of poetry at AS Level detailed consideration must be given to form and structure: it is not enough to simply identify the number of stanzas, lines and rhyming pattern - answers must reflect on how a poem's organisation creates meaning, how it relates to the subject matter and the thematic concerns. When considering Plath and Hughes, analyse how the range of structuring devices (e.g. stanza forms such as tercets, quatrains and quintains, repetition, run-on lines, end-stopped lines, caesuras, rhymes, half or slant-rhymes) are used for effect, and be prepared to say what that effect is.

Both Plath and Hughes use free verse forms, liberating their writing from strict verse forms such as the sonnet. The lack of a regular rhyme scheme combined with enjambment in most, if not all, of their poems allows for a more liberated expression – for Hughes this is the perfect medium for expressing the uncontrollable forces of nature, and for Plath it allows for a raw and emotional outpouring of her speakers' anguish or anger. 'Hawk Roosting' and 'Tulips' are in much more regularly lined stanzas, reflecting the hawk's desire for order and control and the clinical neatness and precision of the speaker's hospital environment. In 'Wodwo' the stream-of-consciousness technique is used to highlight the primitive nature of the man-creature. 'But what shall I be called am I the first/have I an owner what shape am I what/shape am I am I huge'. Here the creature questions his existence but the question marks are absent and the musings merge into one another rapidly, mirroring the thought process.

In many poems Plath experimented with the villanelle, creating her own personal form and this is evident in her use of short condensed tercets in 'Sheep in Fog', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Contusion' and 'Ariel'. In 'Ariel' the run-on lines and enjambment coupled with the poem's short terse phrases and staccato language serve to increase the pace of the poem:



God's lioness,  
How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees! -- The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to  
The brown arc  
Of the neck I cannot catch,...

The speed of the horse is mirrored in the language and structure of lines ('The furrow/ Splits and passes') suggestive of the rush of the landscape as the beast wildly thunders past. The short phrases sporadically describing the ride ('Pivot of heels and knees! --The furrow') confuse the reader, and this is furthered by the caesura. The half rhyme of 'grow' and 'furrow' is missed because of the caesura and enjambment of the lines, thus increasing the speed of the poem and the reader's disorientation. The speaker's lack of control over the animal is evident, but it is important to note that the power in question is a female power, as suggested by the metaphors of 'lioness' and 'sister' to describe the horse: the run-on lines bond the 'sisters' together combining the rider, the horse and the earth.

An analysis of the way in which the stanzas progress from the beginning of the poem to the final revelation or reversal of the last line(s) is also illuminating. Many of Hughes' poems follow a chronological narrative; for example 'The Roe-deer' is a series of couplets that begins with the speaker's sighting of two deer in the road, causing him to reflect on his unity with nature, but ending with the deer vanishing into the snow and the speaker returning 'Back to the ordinary'. The structure of 'Ariel' follows a progression from darkness to light. In 'A Picture of Otto' the speaker considers a photograph of the father-figure from 'Daddy' standing at a blackboard. He confesses that he is surprised to encounter the spectre in his search for his daughter in the imaginative underworld he has created in poetry. In the final lines of the poem the speaker's imagined guilt is forgiven and his quest to find her is successful: he likens her to Wilfred Owen, and just as the famous war poet was able to see his own self in the enemy he encountered in the underworld in 'Strange Meeting', the speaker recognises the daughter as herself 'as if alone', without the domineering father overshadowing her. In 'Blackberrying' the female speaker also seeks something, as is symbolised by the elusive sea which lurks round the corner but never materialises. As she walks down the road the speaker reflects in the second stanza that 'I do not think the sea will appear at all', showing her increased anxiety that she is on the wrong path. At the beginning of the third stanza 'The only thing to come now is the sea'; however the last corner does not bring her, as the reader might expect, to a magnificent view of the ocean but a negative depiction of nothingness, a 'great space' with lights and a din, the sea symbolic of death and absence.



## A03: Contexts

*In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received.*

In this Unit, the stipulated context will be biographical, and the student should demonstrate how this has influenced the poet's work by drawing on relevant information from outside the poem. Contextual information which is made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

## Biographical Context

### Early Years

Hughes grew up in the Calder Valley, South Yorkshire in the 1930s. His rural upbringing, interest in wildlife and closeness with the landscape of the area inform much of his poetry. For example in 'Pike' he recalls a disturbing sight from childhood when his father took him fishing: a pike 'jammed past its gills down the other's gullet', one pike swimming into the mouth of another and both suffocating. Hughes attended Pembroke College Cambridge, studying English Literature, Archaeology and Anthropology. This last subject may have developed his interest in animal fable and shamanism.

Plath was born in 1932 in Boston. The most significant event of her early years was the death of her father Otto Plath, a German etymologist who specialised in bees. The death of her father when Plath was eight is alluded to in several of Plath's poems where the speakers express much remorse, grief and resentment towards the absent yet domineering father-figure. Plath was academically gifted and won two scholarships, allowing her to attend college. She had also achieved some success with her writing at this time, winning prizes and publishing her short stories. However, after failing to gain a place on a Harvard creative writing course she attempted suicide. She suffered from depression for the rest of her life, with many critics noting the impact her mental state had on her poetry.

### Relationship

Plath won a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge University, and met Hughes at a party there in 1956. The details of their first passionate encounter are alluded to in 'Lovesong' and the couple married shortly after in June that year. In the first years of their marriage they both pursued their writing careers; critics note the ways in which each influenced the other's work. Hughes' collection *The Hawk in the Rain*, published in 1957, gained immediate critical praise, while Plath still searched for the voice that would make its impact on the literary canon. Their children Frieda and Nicholas, born in 1960 and 1962, are referred to in 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' and 'The Night Dances'. Plath's journals describe the couple's turbulent



relationship. Initially passionate and fiery, it increasingly became contentious, marred by conflict, jealousy and their competitive natures. The marriage ended in 1962 when Hughes left Plath for another poet, Assia Wevill, his unfaithfulness presented as a painful betrayal in several of Plath's poems.

## Death

The winter of 1962-3 was a difficult period for Plath who was in her most prolific literary period. Biographers note her depression and stress as she struggled to balance her roles of mother and poet. She committed suicide in February 1963 by gassing herself in the oven while the children slept upstairs. 'Contusion' is one of her latest poems, reportedly written eleven days before her death, and its note of finality and hopelessness is often read as an expression of the poet's mental distress.

Plath's death had a major impact on Hughes. She became a feminist icon for women, whilst Hughes was vilified by the press, with accusations of his callousness driving her to suicide. This was compounded by the fact that Wevill also committed suicide using a gas oven in 1969, killing both herself and their four year old daughter. Hughes remained silent on the subject for over thirty years until his last collection *Birthday Letters* published before his death in 1998. The London Times announced the publication as "Revealed: the most tragic literary love story of our time." The collection is an intimate portrayal of the relationship, capturing the emotional chaos of their union alongside a heartfelt rendering of their tenderness and mutual respect.

## Literary Context

The poetry of Plath and Hughes contains numerous literary and classical allusions: 'Ariel' for example refers to the character from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* while the influence of Romantic and Victorian writers can be found in Hughes' work. Hughes' work can be read in the context of other famous writers such as Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill who similarly used history, mythology, and the rural landscape in their poetry. In *Poetry Since 1945*, Neil Corcoran explores their shared interests and the similarities in their approach to literature; their fascination with primitive societies, mythology, and European history; their examination of the disruptive forces in society; and their preoccupation with violent, sexual and grotesque images.

Plath is most associated with Confessional poetry, writing in the same tradition as other American poets such as Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton who influenced her writing. Confessional poets focused upon especially painful moments in their lives. The movement reacted against the repressive nature of the 1950s, interested in bringing the suppressed aspects of the individual to the surface. Confessional poets focused on particularly painful moments in their lives and explored the therapeutic value of poetry, giving poets the opportunity to confront inner conflicts and work through these issues towards a resolution. Such poetry is autobiographical, concerned with self-expression and translating private experience into poetry (Hoffman, "*Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poet*", ELH). In this sense, poetry is an direct unveiling of the self, an assertion of the self. Plath's poetry, like that of the Confessionals, was wrapped up in the personal details of her life. Her relationship with her father, her turbulent marriage to Ted Hughes, her suicide attempts and her own mania and depression all figure heavily in her poetry. However it is important to recognise the ways in which Plath transcends this movement:



throughout her poetry Plath often fictionalises, caricatures, and mythologizes personal elements and her obscure use of metaphor and the complexity of language serve to add layers of meaning.



## A04: Connections:

*In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between poems.*

The student should explore connections between two poems, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

### Specimen Question:

This question is about **reactions to death**

Read again 'Daffodils' by Hughes and 'Daddy' by Plath. By analysis of the **poetic methods** used, and drawing on relevant biographical information, compare and contrast how these poets write about reactions to death.

**N.B.** Equal marks are available for your treatment of each poem.

In planning an orderly and relevant response to this question, there will need to be an awareness of how each poet deals with the theme of reactions to death in his/her poem and how the treatments of the theme differ. There will also need to be an awareness of biographical contextual information.

#### 1. Autobiographical nature of the poems

- Both poems express the sense of loss and grief at the death of a loved one and are haunted by these memories.
- Based on personal experience: Plath's 'Daddy' figure is based on Otto Plath, the poet's German father who died when she was eight years old and who had a huge emotional impact on her life. Small references like the 'one gray toe' and 'Nauset' have autobiographical significance.
- 'Daffodils' relates to the early relationship of Plath and Hughes where Hughes recalls a real event where the couple collected flowers.

#### 2. Analysis of the speaker and his/her reactions to death

- Both poems are in the form of a conversation with the dead; a monologue with an imagined addressee.
- 'Daffodils' – the poem has an elegiac tone with the male speaker sharing personal details regarding the relationship, expressing a sense of loss and regret through the numerous questions.
- 'Daddy' – the thirty-year-old speaker adopts an accusatory tone, bitter and angry, lashing out at the father-figure in a childish, petulant way. Note the contradictory nature of the speaker as she has a masochistic attraction to the figure despite her attempts to exorcise it. She expresses a sense of victimisation and mental fragility yet is obsessed with her own mortality.

#### 3 Representation of the absent figure

- In 'Daffodils' the missing Plath is represented through the activity of



gathering the spring flowers. Hughes emphasises the couple's sense of togetherness with the speaker's continual reference to 'we', but neither recognised the significance of the moment at the time.

- In 'Daddy' the father-figure is controlling and domineering, a nightmarish figure who has a God-like power to tyrannize the living. He is 'marble-heavy' suggesting his oppressive weight.

#### 4. Symbols linked to death

- Notice the way both poets use symbolism and colour, but to different effects.
- 'Daffodils' – the flowers link to the speaker's memory of the loved one, but their delicate beauty is fragile and perhaps not appreciated as they are sold for profit. The flowers parallel the relationship, in that they are cut too early, sold for profit and wither away. They represent the transience of life.
- 'Daddy' - the black shoe is restricting and suffocating. Plath employs images of mass oppression and the holocaust to depict the speaker's sense of victimhood and feelings of persecution and fear.

#### 5. Reactions to death. This is the key term of the question and should be foregrounded in your answer.

- Both look at the emotional impact of death and express a sense of mortality.
- Hughes, as in other poems, reflects on the transience and cyclical nature of life and death. The perennial flowers offer a glimpse of the eternal in that they return every year blooming from the same bulb but perish quickly, suggesting that life is fleeting. However 'Daffodils' is a personal consideration of death, expressing a sense of melancholy and regret for the missed significance of private moments.
- Plath, as well as exploring the power the dead have over the living, considers the living's obsession with the dead and the desire to be reunited, making a comment on human destructiveness.



## Plath and Hughes: Activities and Revision Exercises

### Approaching the Poems

To conduct your own analysis of the poem, follow these steps:

- Summarise what happens in the poem, focusing on the story / narrative behind the poem. Shorten your summary to 50 words or even one word.
- Look for oppositions or conflict within the poem, perhaps between speaker and characters, within the speaker him/herself or within the language of the poem.
- Investigate the language:
  1. Patterns in the poem i.e. word clusters, recurring images, colours.
  2. Note anything remarkable about the syntax, sentence structure and punctuation.
  3. Identify the use of language features and consider their effect.
  4. Read the poem out loud focusing on the sound patterns.
- Make notes on the form/structure of the poem. How does the form and structure reflect (or contrast) with the subject matter or theme of the poem?
  1. Rhyme and rhythm
  2. Number of stanzas/lines within stanza
  3. Consider the final stanza – is there a twist or revelation?
- Sum up your responses to the poem.

To consolidate and extend your analysis:

- Conduct your own secondary research, finding out alternative opinions and readings of the poem.
- Write your analysis up into a set of revision notes and bullet points
- Discuss your analysis with other students, e.g. post a comment on a discussion form and invite others to offer their opinions. Alternatively, you could respond to comments already posted.

Analysing specific aspects of the poem(s):

### Poetic Voice

- Read the poem several times and listen to the speaking voice. What do you learn about the speaker and his/her attitudes and tone? Listen to dramatic readings of the texts and consider how the reading conveys the tone and attitudes of the speaker.
- Analyse the speaking voice in detail, focusing on key quotations within the poem.



Consider the following issues in your exploration:

- a) Is the voice male or female? How do you know?
- b) What narrative perspective is being used: first- or third-person narration?
- c) To whom is the poem addressed? Is direct address apparent or is it more like a dramatic monologue?
- d) Consider the relationship between the speaker and the subject of the poem. What point of view is presented and what is the speaker's tone?
- e) Does the point of view change within the poem? Does the tone change?
- f) How does the speaker compare with that of other poems?
- g) Are there any contradictions or ambiguities? Conflicts?
- h) Analyse the language used by the speaker:
  - Lexis and choice of vocabulary
  - Sentence structures
  - Past or present tense?
  - Use of figurative language

## Imagery and Symbolism

- Before reading make a list to illustrate typical images related to a theme e.g. death, love and relationships. Compare the images used in the poem with your list.
- Read through a poem and make a list of all the objects referred to. Choose one object to consider in more detail and create a spidergram to explore its symbolic significance. Think about the themes that the symbol links to and how the symbol is described.

## Form and Structure

- Cut out a version of the poem and re-sequence the stanzas, experimenting with the order. Think about the chronological order of the poem e.g. the time references or how devices such as enjambment connect the stanzas.
- Read a stanza or a poem printed without any line/stanza breaks. Discuss where the breaks should go and experiment with the different effects. Compare your version with the original and discuss what effect your changes have.
- Compare the opening of the poem to the closing.



## A03: Context

- Watch/read interviews with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqhsnk6vY8E>
- Read the information regarding the literary context and further research  
Confessional poetry, shamanism, mythology and archetypes.

## A04: Connections

- Create a chart comparing two poems e.g. 'Pike' and 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' using the following headings: THEME, USE OF SPEAKER, IMAGERY, TONE, STRUCTURE



## Glossary of Poetic Terms

An important part of your response in the exam will be your appropriate and relevant use of literary terminology. Below is a list of terms you are likely to come across in your study of poetry.

- **alliteration:** the repetition of sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity. The term is usually applied to the repetition of consonants.
- **assonance:** two or more words, which are in close proximity, repeating the same vowel sounds.
- **bathos:** a juxtaposition of the important with the insignificant or trivial – often to comment ironically on the actual insignificance of what is deemed important. This figure of speech can also be used purely humorously.
- **cadence:** inflection or emphasis, sometimes used for poetry based on a “musical phrase” of language rather than a strict metre.
- **caesura:** a significant pause within a line of poetry, generally created by the use of punctuation.
- **diction:** the language used in a work of literature particularly as regards vocabulary choices.
- **epigram:** a short, pithy saying, conveying a profound thought in an economical and arresting way.
- **hyperbole:** language that uses exaggeration for effect.
- **image:** For the purpose of AO2 analysis in this unit, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as “detailing”.
- **imagery:** this word generally applies in a visual sense to figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects.
- **irony:** this is language and tone that implies that the intended meaning is different from the expressed meaning.
- **metaphor:** where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
- **metre:** metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
- **motif:** a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.



- **neologism:** a new word, sometimes a compound of two or more existing words, or an existing word with an unusual prefix or suffix added.
- **onomatopoeia:** when a sound is conveyed in word form; or when the sound of a word enhances its meaning.
- **oxymoron:** a figure of speech where two juxtaposed words or phrases appear to be contradictory.
- **paradox:** where two ideas, expressed in close proximity, are apparently contradictory, but on closer examination prove to be meaningfully related.
- **personification:** to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
- **satire:** the use of humour – often through mimicry and exaggeration – to expose as absurd a society, a belief or ethic, or a person or class of people and thereby to ridicule it.
- **simile:** where something is explicitly compared to something else, e.g. by using “like” or “as”.
- **synaesthesia:** the expression of a deliberate confusing of the senses (e.g. describing music as a colour, or light as a liquid).
- **tone:** the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, effected through use of language, rhythm and punctuation.

