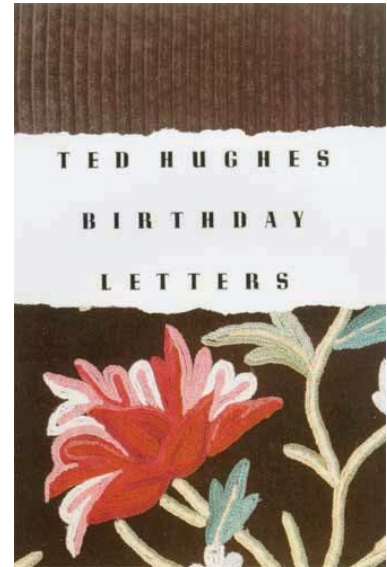




Reading Group Gold

Birthday Letters

by Ted Hughes



ISBN: 0-374-52581-1 | 208 pages

About this Guide

This Reader's Guide is meant to help you think and talk about Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. The recent book by Britain's late Poet Laureate was twenty-five years in the writing and was acclaimed as the consummate achievement of his career. In it critics discerned the qualities for which Hughes was famous—powerful metaphorical language, an unparalleled eye for the natural and animal worlds, and a tragic vision that owes as much to Darwin and D.H. Lawrence as it does to Aeschylus or Sophocles. But *Birthday Letters* also represents a radical

departure, for its eighty-eight poems are more accessible, more emotionally resonant, more dramatic and personally revealing than any Hughes had written before. "Reading it," poet and biographer Andrew Motion remarked in *The Sunday Times* of London, "is like being hit by a thunderbolt . . . There is nothing like it in literature" (January 17, 1998).

As anyone who has skimmed the voluminous press coverage knows, *Birthday Letters* is Hughes's account of his marriage to Sylvia Plath, which began as a love match between two gifted and ambitious young poets and ended with Plath's suicide in 1963 at the age of thirty, after Hughes had left her for another woman. The book thus makes up the untold portion of one of the great tragic love stories of our time, one so laden with myth and acrimony that at times it resembles a post-feminist *Romeo and Juliet*. Up until now we knew that story only as it had been related by Plath herself, in *Ariel*, the book of poems published after her death, and by her biographers and hagiographers. The latter have cast Plath as a literary saint and martyr, driven to kill herself by her husband's faithlessness and then silenced by his stringent control over her papers. Hughes's refusal to discuss his first wife publicly, or to assist the inquiries of most journalists and scholars, left this version of the Plath legend virtually unchallenged for three decades.

With *Birthday Letters*, Hughes does not so much dispel the myth as compose one of his own. Jane Brown "It is only a story," he writes. "Your story. My story" ("Visit"). Although he sometimes addresses his and Plath's children (to whom he also dedicates the book) and, in at least one instance, the more fanatical of Plath's champions, Hughes's story is aimed primarily to Sylvia Plath herself: Plath the poet, whose lines he often echoes and whose themes he reworks or resets as one resets a watch when traveling into another time zone; and Plath the woman he loved and to all appearances has not ceased loving thirty-six years after he left her. It is a complex love, an amalgam of passion, tenderness, respect, and awe, along with anger, frustration, pity, and despair, and its complexity makes *Birthday Letters* more convincing than any straightforward elegy would be. Among Hughes's signal accomplishments in this book is the way he compresses all the emotional anarchy of the conjugal bond into his account of his own marriage. He has endowed that account with a narrative momentum that has been largely absent from English-language poetry since the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning and T. S. Eliot. And Hughes has conjured up Plath, his subject and antagonist, with an immediacy that makes us feel that he is addressing someone who has just walked out of the room—and that he may still be waiting for her to answer him.



Reading Group Gold

About the Marriage

When Ted Hughes met Sylvia Plath at a party in Cambridge in 1956, she was a twenty-four-year-old Fulbright Scholar at Newnham College, a tense, lovely girl with long American legs and a small scar on her face. The tall, dourly handsome Hughes, Plath wrote, was “the only man I’ve met yet here who’d be strong enough to be equal with” (Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*, p. 36). Their attraction was immediate and volcanic. Their first kiss ended with Plath biting Hughes on the cheek so hard that she drew blood. “The swelling ringmoat of tooth-marks,” he writes in “St Botolph’s,” “. . . was to brand my face for the next month. The me beneath it for good” (p. 15).

Four months after their first meeting, Hughes and Plath were married. While she completed the second year of her Fulbright, he taught at a secondary school in Cambridge. The following year they moved to Boston, not far from where Plath had grown up and gone to college. Plath taught at Smith College and studied poetry with Robert Lowell. Hughes got a teaching job at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. They traveled in the United States and Europe and in 1959 returned to England. In 1960 they had their first child, a girl named Frieda Rebecca. A son, Nicholas Farrer, was born in 1962.

Although Plath’s first book of poems, *The Colossus*, was published in 1960, in those years Hughes was the public partner in their marriage. He wrote tirelessly, courting his muse with everything from astrology to Jungian psychology. Plath had not yet found the voice that would burst forth triumphantly and alarmingly in her last book, *Ariel*. She was haunted, groping, and unstable, bitterly obsessed by her father, a German-born entomologist who had died when she was eight. The scar that Hughes had so tenderly remarked was the souvenir of an earlier suicide attempt. Plath recorded that attempt and her ensuing confinement in a psychiatric hospital in *The Bell Jar*, an autobiographical novel that was published in England in 1963, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.

By then the marriage was over. In 1962 Hughes had left Plath for another poet, Assia Wevill. In February 1963 Plath killed herself by putting her head in a gas oven while her two children slept. She had sealed their bedroom against gas fumes and left milk and bread for them to find when they awoke (Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, p. 7). In the years that followed—particularly after the posthumous publication of *Ariel*—Plath became a tragic icon for a generation of women, while Hughes was recast as the ogre in their fairy tale. Plath’s advocates denounced Hughes as a murderer. (He had married Wevill, who killed herself and their daughter in 1969, employing the same method that Plath had used.) His readings were disrupted by angry demonstrators. Hughes’s name has been repeatedly chipped off Plath’s gravestone (Sarah Lyall, “A Divided Response to Hughes Poems,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1998).

Questions for Discussion

1. Who is the “you” that the author addresses in these poems? Does the “you” ever change, and if so, in which poems? Are any of these poems addressed to “you,” the reader?
2. Describe the person who is the subject and the object of these poems. What does she look like? How does she behave? How does the author feel about her? Are Hughes’s descriptions and characterizations always consistent? Given the fact that he does not name his object, what persuades us that he is writing about one person?
3. What does Hughes accuse the “you” in these poems of doing? If you were the person addressed in *Birthday Letters*, how would you answer him?



Reading Group Gold

Questions for Discussion

4. The poems in *Birthday Letters* tell a story. Is it possible to reconstruct that story without re-sorting to what we know about the “real” Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath? How might these poems strike a reader who knew nothing of their factual basis? Are we intended to read Hughes’s narrative as an accurate record of events?
5. Just as Hughes composes a portrait of *Birthday Letters*’s “you,” he also gives us a sense of the “I” who is its narrator. What sort of character is he? Where is he sympathetic? What are his failings? Is the narrator the same person as the author?
6. Why are these poems presented in the order they are? Is their sequence strictly chronological? In what poems does the author foreshadow future events? Where does he flash back in time? Is it your sense that these poems appear in the order in which Hughes first wrote them or that he rearranged them to create a particular effect?
7. The poems in *Birthday Letters* belong to two types: straightforward narratives, like “St Botolph’s” and “The Rabbit Catcher,” and allegorical poems, like “The Minotaur” and “The Bee God.” How do these styles differ? What are their respective strengths and weaknesses? Why might Hughes have chosen to tell his story in two different ways? Discuss other examples of these different poetic methods.
8. What story does Hughes tell in the poem “The Tender Place”? What is the significance of the scar he remarks in such poems as “St Botolph’s,” “18 Rugby Street,” and “The Badlands”? In what other ways does he suggest that “you” (or, for the sake of simplicity, “Sylvia”) was emotionally unstable? Is his evidence convincing?
9. At different points in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes compares Sylvia’s madness to a machine (“The Machine”), a “womb-tumour” (“Moonwalk”), and an ominous “doppelgänger” in a painting (“Portraits”). Why might he have chosen to portray madness as something alien, an intrusion, rather than as an intrinsic part of Sylvia’s character? What are the ramifications of this vision? What other symbols of intrusion, invasion, or possession occur in such poems as “Black Coat,” “Remission,” “The Afterbirth,” and “The Table”? Who or what is the invader in “Dreamers”?
10. Among the many intruders in *Birthday Letters* is the specter of Sylvia’s father. How does his presence (and absence) inform such poems as “The Shot,” “Black Coat,” “The Minotaur,” “The Table,” “The Bee God,” “The Cast,” and “A Picture of Otto”? What is his significance to Sylvia? To the narrator? In what ways does the narrator suggest that this figure is responsible for Sylvia’s fate?
11. Hughes also describes Sylvia as wearing masks (“Moonwalk,” “The Earthenware Head”) and playing roles (“The Blue Flannel Suit,” “Setebos”). In “The Hands,” he compares her to a pair of gloves. What is the nature of these disguises and impostures? Does Sylvia adopt them deliberately? Do Sylvia’s masks and roles conceal a “true” self, and if so, what is it? In which poems does the narrator himself adopt a false persona, or become possessed by an alien self?
12. Hughes makes recurrent references to Sylvia’s Americanness (“Fulbright Scholars,” “Your Paris,” “Stubbing Wharfe”). What significance does he attach to this? How does he oppose this quality to his own Englishness? How do the poems set in America differ from those set in Europe?
13. Discuss the ways in which the poet uses animals (“Sam,” “The Owl,” “The Chipmunk,” “9 Willow Street,” “The 59th Bear,” “Epiphany,” “The Rabbit Catcher,” “The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother”). How does Hughes manage to convey their animality while also turning them into symbols? What do the different animals symbolize? Why, in “Your Paris,” does Hughes describe himself as a dog?



Reading Group Gold

Questions for Discussion

14. What happens in the poem “Epiphany”? How does this incident become a test of the narrator’s marriage, and how does the narrator fail it? In what other poems does Hughes employ the metaphor of a test?

15. The poems in *Birthday Letters* contain allusions to Donne (“18 Rugby Street”), Shakespeare (“A Pink Wool Knitted Dress,” “Setebos”), Chaucer (“St. Botolph’s,” “Chaucer”), and Emily Brontë (“Wuthering Heights”), and to the poems of Sylvia Plath (“The Rabbit Catcher,” “The Bee God,” “Night-Ride on Ariel”). What is the function of these allusions? How might reading *The Tempest* or *Ariel* deepen your understanding of this book? In what ways is the entire book a response to the writing of Sylvia Plath? Does the use of literary allusions heighten or lessen the emotional impact of these poems?

16. Discuss the role of oracles and portents in such poems as “St Botolph’s,” “Ouija,” “Horoscope,” “Grand Canyon,” “Fairy Tale,” and “Life after Death.” Do these portents merely foreshadow events in the narrative, or do they serve another purpose? By evoking fate so dramatically—and even luridly—is the poet suggesting that what happened to Sylvia was unavoidable? Based on the evidence in these poems, do you agree?

About the Author

Ted Hughes (1930–1998) was born in Yorkshire, England, the youngest of three children. He grew up in the Yorkshire countryside, whose landscape and wildlife inform much of his poetry. In 1948 he was admitted to Pembroke College, Cambridge, graduating in 1954 with a degree in English and anthropology. Over the next two years he wrote poems while working as a nightwatchman, a rose gardener, and an employee of the J. Arthur Rank film company.

In 1957 Hughes’s first book of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain*, won the First Publication Award in New York, judged by Stephen Spender, Marianne Moore, and W. H. Auden. A second collection, *Lupercal*, appeared in 1960 and was given the Somerset Maugham Award and the Hawthornden Prize. Hughes went on to write more than forty books: poetry, including *Wodwo*, *Crow*, *Moortown Diary*, *New Selected Poems 1957–1994* and *Birthday Letters*, his account of his marriage to Sylvia Plath; translation, including Seneca’s *Oedipus*, Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*, and *Tales from Ovid*, winner of the 1997 Whitbread Prize; and prose works such as *Poetry in the Making*, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, *Winter Pollen*, and *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*. Hughes, who lived in Devon, England, was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1977, was named Poet Laureate to Queen Elizabeth II in 1984, and received the Order of Merit shortly before his death in October 1998. He left two finished works unpublished in the United States—translations of Racine’s *Phèdre* (published in January 1999) and of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* (June 1999).