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The Blood Jet of Poetry: Muse myths, poetic influence, and the common text of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

Fate united Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes in February 1956, and for nearly seven years they worked side-by-side as poets. Though she often feared Hughes’s effect on her poems, characterizing it as a “disastrous whirlpool,” Plath could not help but admit they had “made” each other (Journals 401). After her suicide in 1963, Plath’s influence seemed to fade from Hughes’s imagination, but throughout his life Hughes maintained that he was only person who “truly” understood his wife and her poetry. In an interview with the Manchester Guardian, Hughes described their writing life: “There was no rivalry between us as poets or any other way. It sounds trite but you completely influence one another if you live together. You begin to write out of one brain” (Wagner 21). Previous comparative studies have constructed Plath and Hughes’s relationship in oppositional terms, yet the two poets’ own understanding of their relationship was different. They were superficially concerned about originality and worried about each other’s influence, but underneath their anxiety they needed each other as “muses.”

As a cultural concept, the muse has a long history of meanings that shift during different historical moments. Etymologically, it came into English from the Middle French, les muses, which meant “liberal arts,” and often specifically referred to poetry (1548). La muse also referred to “poetry” (1559). The word muse evolved to signify a person who inspires a literary work (1575) or the inspiration of a particular poet (1665). Middle French derived the word from classical Latin mūsa, which meant poetic inspiration or poetry in general. Its original root in ancient Greek μούσα (Doric μωσα, Aeolic μοίσα) translated to mean Muse,¹ music, song, or liberal arts. For clarity’s sake, I provide a more focused definition of the muse using Robert Graves’s The White Goddess, a book that popularized the idea of a mythical relationship between muse and poet during Plath and Hughes’s lifetime. The White Goddess’s foundational

¹ One of nine goddesses of the liberal arts.
“possession model” established the muse as an external, objectified locus of creativity that provided the inspiration to write poetry through ritual acts of possession. As they both read *The White Goddess*, Plath and Hughes constructed the muse in a Gravesian way that attributed inspiration to the external world.

After World War II, changes in Western culture affected ideas of creativity and constructions of the muse. Critic Lawrence R. Ries’s book *Wolf Masks* (1977) offers the term “postwar temperament” to explain how violence erupted into the everyday awareness of individuals. As the postwar temperament gained discursive power, individuals began articulating their experiences in terms of violence. Many artists, like Plath and Hughes, shifted the meaning of the muse to incorporate its destructive or self-threatening aspects in a new way. The muse became a demonic figure that intruded into the poet’s psyche, rather than a passive source of inspiration; it represented external battles or internal “war wounds.” The muse became, as Plath wrote, the “blood jet of poetry.”

Psychoanalytic theory expands concept of the muse as it relates to Plath and Hughes. Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage” provided the language that constructed the muse as the poet’s “mirrored double.” Using a psychoanalytic framework, my paper explores a poet-muse relationship in which the poet constructs the muse as a whole, and therefore omnipotent, external other. The poet projects internal conflicts on the muse, falsely believing it can reconcile those conflicts and transform them into the harmony that inspires poetry and the poet possesses that “harmony” by writing. However, these conflicts have not been transformed, only displaced. The poet simply repossesses his/her own conflicts—portions of his/her “self.” The muse represents the poet’s projected self, not truly an individuated and whole other; therefore, the projected self
provides inspiration and the muse is a false construction—the poet is the muse and the muse is the poet.

Psychoanalytic theories rest on the assumption that the poet’s muse is not an agent, rather the object upon which the poet projects internal conflicts. But because Plath and Hughes actively engaged in similar psychic actions as poets, a psychoanalytic approach destabilizes the line between their two distinct identities. As two poets working collaboratively, their reciprocal marking of each other as “muse” drew them closer together over time. Their shared projection of their most intimate conflicts produced the feeling that they knew each other so thoroughly that they were, in fact, the same psyche split into two bodies. As a theoretical framework, psychoanalytic theory illuminates the creative relationship of Plath and Hughes. However, I do not suggest that psychoanalysis always provides the best way to understand creativity in general. Rather, psychoanalytic theory’s merging of poet and muse helps understand how Plath and Hughes in particular could have written “out of one brain.”

Harold Bloom’s theories of poetic influence explain how Plath and Hughes’s reliance on each other as muses fostered a seemingly oppositional relationship. Bloom suggests that poets cannot exist without the influence of other poets. Such necessary reliance on others generates the “anxiety of influence” as the “new” poet must establish an identity distinct from the “precursor” poet, which forces him/her to react against the precursor and violently “misprise” (or transform) the precursor’s text. Bloom helpfully illustrates how Plath and Hughes experienced writing as an exercise in oppositional revision. Often, they wrote on the opposite sides of each other’s unpublished manuscript pages, signifying their opposition to each other’s writing.

However, Bloom’s theories only superficially analyze their relationship as oppositional because reading Plath’s Ariel (1965) and Hughes’s Crow (1970) together reveals a “common
text” that they wrote out of “one brain.” Both collections indicate the obsession with violence that was typical of the postwar temperament. Violence, as a theme, draws the collections together. Additionally, Plath and Hughes complicate Bloom’s theories of poetic influence because they wrote contemporaneously. I argue that Plath and Hughes needed each other. Though they revised each other’s work, they required their collaboration to generate a common lexicon of concepts that they could pass between each other, thus generating a shared, common text. Neither Plath nor Hughes could have written their seemingly individuated texts without the other.

In my first chapter, I define the muse using theoretical evidence from Graves. I also consider the effects of the postwar temperament on the muse and suggest violence as a unifying theme of post World War II poets. I then expand Graves’s definition using several psychoanalytic theorists. I apply Plath’s journals and Hughes’s private correspondence to confirm Graves’s impact on their construction of the muse, and I use selected poems from *Ariel* and *Crow* to illustrate how the postwar temperament and psychoanalytic theory inform Plath and Hughes’s understanding of the poet-muse relationship. In chapter two, I focus on Bloom’s theories regarding the anxiety of influence and compare selections from *Ariel* and *Crow* to demonstrate their revision of each other. In chapter three, I complicate Bloom’s theories using a comparative textual analysis of two sets of paired poems from *Ariel* and *Crow*. 
Chapter 1: The Muse

In her journal, Plath wrote, “The buried male muse [and] god creator [has] risen to be my mate in Ted” (Journals 381). Plath recognized the “buried” muse in Hughes, which she, as a female poet, drew out of him. Stimulated by sexual energy, she recognized that Hughes had “risen” and become her “mate,” likening his influence on her poetic work to a phallus’s active rising. Plath’s use of “god creator” evoked her fear that Hughes threatened her originality because as a male god/muse he threatened to eclipse Plath, the female mortal/poet. In response to her anxiety, Plath contained Hughes, calling him “her mate.” Plath possessed Hughes—he was “hers” and implicitly under her poetic control. Her journal entry indicated her vision of the poet-muse relationship: she, the poet, controlled Hughes, her muse, and harnessed his inspirational power to create her poetry. Plath flipped the standard poet-muse connection in order to create a distinct poet-muse relationship. In her writing, Hughes figured prominently as a male “muse,” driving Ariel’s particularly anti-patriarchal poems like “Daddy.”

At the time he published Crow, Hughes was heavily involved in constructing Plath’s public image. He served as executor of her estate and edited several collections of her poetry (including Ariel), her journals, and her correspondence. Additionally, the public routinely asked him to comment on Plath’s life and death when feminist critics vilified Hughes in the 1970s popular press, seeking to hold Plath up as a victim of Hughes and patriarchal society. Hughes dedicated Crow to the “memory of Assia [Weevil] and Shura” (Hughes’s lover and daughter), which suggested that he found inspiration from someone other than Plath, but, as the man responsible for constructing her public image, he in fact remained preoccupied with her. Even Hughes’s dedication to Assia Weevil obliquely paid homage to Plath’s influence. After Plath’s suicide, Weevil frequently admitted to feeling “haunted” by Plath’s ghost (Feinstein 150-51).
Weevil’s death bizarrely mirrored Plath’s; like Plath, she asphyxiated herself in a gas oven. By slowly adopting a Plath-like identity, Weevil revealed how Plath retained a strong enough presence in Hughes’s life to threaten and even “possess” those who sought to take her place. Ultimately, Weevil’s death can be seen as the “triggering point” that pushed Hughes, already haunted by the memory of Plath, to appropriate in *Crow* the violence and sardonic wit saturating *Ariel*. As a muse, Plath figured more obliquely in *Crow* than Hughes did in *Ariel*, but Hughes’s continual preoccupation with her and her effect on Weevil’s identity confirmed her presence in his life and his work.

**Graves’s “White Goddess” myth**

Robert Graves’s theory of the muse in *The White Goddess*, a book both Plath and Hughes studied at Cambridge University, cast the poet-muse relationship in terms of prehistoric ritual and acts of possession (24-5). Though idiosyncratic and often difficult to follow, Graves asserted a very serious conclusion about the muse: all “true poetry” comes from possession by the divine figure, “White Goddess” (10). Poets, he argued, achieved “possession” through orgiastic rituals and cult worship of prehistoric goddess figures. He suggested that Shakespeare and the Romantics (specifically Coleridge and Keats) best represent those poets who kept the White Goddess alive and, thus, wrote the “truest” poetry (426-27). He argued that the “true poet must always be original, but in a simpler sense: he must address only the [m]use […] and tell her the truth about himself and her in his own passionate and peculiar words.” Graves cautions, “A poet cannot continue to be a poet if he feels that he has made a permanent conquest of the [m]use, that she is always his for the asking” (444). Thus, poetry originates in the perpetually tense relationship between the poet and muse. It should be devoted to describing the muse and her influence on the poet.
Graves had a profound impact on Hughes. *The White Goddess* connected him with several of his university classmates who would begin *The St. Bodolph’s Review* in the mid-1950s while Hughes attended Cambridge (Feinstein 41). Graves’s pseudo-historical approach to constructing the myth surrounding the “White Goddess” particularly fascinated Hughes (36). As a result, Graves’s text encouraged Hughes to explore the world of mythmaking, which would later ground much of his poetry, including *Crow*. Hughes acknowledged the power behind Graves’s assertions and his model of the poet-muse relationship. In a 1995 letter Hughes wrote, “Once I got used to Graves, and realised that he shared some of my obsessions, I suppose I more or less soaked the book up” (*Letters* 679).

Although Plath was attracted to Graves’s theories, his sexism presented problems for her. She found it difficult to accept such statements as: “A woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing. […] She should be the visible moon: impartial, loving, severe, wise” (Graves 446). Graves challenged the legitimacy of women poets, which exacerbated Plath’s feelings of inadequacy. She struggled with the fear that she did not fit the poetic standards established by men. In her journals she wrote with melodramatic self-loathing, “Above all, CAN A SELFISH EGOCENTRIC JEALOUS AND UNIMAGINATIVE FEMALE WRITE A DAMN THING WORTH WHILE?” (*Journals* 99). Graves also threatened Plath’s “other identity” as a wife and mother. When not writing, she often articulated her identity in domestic terms; in a 1959 journal entry she admitted, “I want to be an Earth Mother in the deepest richest sense. I have turned from being an intellectual, a career woman: all that is ash to me” (500). However, Graves had argued, “The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual ‘other woman,’ and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because temptation

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2 The vehicle for Hughes’s first published poetry.

3 Addressed to Nick Gammage.
to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every […] muses’ heart” (449). Graves’s theories presented a classic double bind situation for Plath—she could not write as a poet, nor could she support Hughes as a wife.

Despite Graves’s blatant sexism, Plath accepted his model of the poet-muse relationship. In a 1957 journal entry she described her novel-writing process using Graves-inspired language: “I find myself describing episodes: you don’t have to follow your Judith Greenwood [later named ‘Esther Greenwood’ in Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*] to breakfast, lunch, dinner, or tell about her train rides, unless the flash forwards her, reveals her. Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: she is the *white goddess*” (*Journals* 289, my italics). Her use of “white goddess” suggested that Plath ignored Graves’s sexism, ignored the gender implications of his theories, and stripped Graves of his potential to block her writing. While she feared not writing anything “worth while,” Plath’s anxieties are never specifically attributed to Graves and, when she wrote, she used his language to describe her writing process. Thus, despite being female, Plath accepted Graves’s model as readily as Hughes did.

The “postwar temperament” and the Creative Wound

The generation of poets writing after World War II lived through highly publicized catastrophic events, like the Holocaust, the dropping of the Atom bomb, and the eruption of “total” war. Brutal tyrants such as Adolf Hitler made violence seem natural and even banal. Articulating his justification of violence in Darwinian terms, Hitler argued, “The whole of human nature is a continuous struggle between strength and weakness, and eternal victory of the strong over the weak” (*Hitler’s Words* 11). Hitler illustrated how power became synonymous with violence rather than its opposite, and violence had become the expected norm for the post-World War II generation (Ries 9). Poets writing in this time of violence shifted the meaning of
creativity so that it incorporated destruction. This shift affected ideas of the muse, which was no longer constructed without violence in mind. Furthermore, violence itself became a kind of “hostile muse.” This provocative shift announced the development of a “postwar temperament” that could never free itself from the influence of violence. Ultimately, the discourse of violence united post-World War II poets under a common lexicon of violence.

As part of the cultural consciousness, violence motivated extraordinary feats in art. In *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), Edmund Wilson anticipated the effects of violence as it changed creativity. He focused specifically on the subject of violence—the victim—by drawing his evidence from the myth describing the Greek hero Philoctetes. He argued that “The victim of [violence] which renders him abhorrent to society and periodically degrades him and makes him helpless is also the mast of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect and which the normal man finds he needs” (294). The victim bears a wound that provides the foundation for his/her unique, almost superhuman, powers. Wilson applied this “wound” to poetic creativity. He argued, through several case studies, that the poet carries a “creative wound,” a scar that provides a poet with great creative abilities and provides a constant source of inspiration. Wilson’s creative wound applied logically to the postwar temperament. In a newly catastrophic world, poets carried the psychic wounds embedded in the cultural consciousness and then used those wounds to write poetry.

As poets grouped under the postwar temperament, Plath and Hughes were keenly aware of the significance of violence in their culture. Plath continually examined physical and psychological violence that surrounded her life, which originated in the shocking death of her father. She was “unable to isolate the violence, or objectify it in her in order to come to terms

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4Sophocles recorded the myth of Philoctetes in his play *Philoctetes* (Wilson 272). According to the myth, Philoctetes carried a wound on his foot that afforded him extraordinary archery skill because the wound provided him a focus for his skill.
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with it. Rather it continually spilled over into her life and even reached into those areas that she had felt to be secure” (Ries 36). As for Hughes, “for the most part, violence was an accepted fact of life that exists as the connecting link between all creatures in the history of the earth” (92). Hughes accepted violence as a “natural” entity. He acknowledged the power and depth of violence, and claimed that humans were “natural” and “animals.” Hughes often used animal motifs to discuss patterns of violence, generating an effective analogue to explore the violent intricacies of the human psyche. In private journals and correspondence, Plath and Hughes noted the violence that infiltrated their intimate relationship. Plath sometimes blamed Hughes for creating their violent relationship, which negatively affected her ability as a poet. When she wrote about herself, she even admitted: “I cannot ignore this murderous self: it is there. I smell it and feel it” (Journals 618). For Hughes, art provided an escape from the psychological wounds inflicted by Plath’s death. In a 1984 letter, Hughes characterized art as the “psychological conscious wavebands as strategies for not feeling the real pain” (Letters 484). As muses, Plath and Hughes provided each other with a target for their violence; thus they were not only victims of each other’s violence but also the aggressors.

By themselves Ariel and Crow are incredibly violent texts. In poems like “Daddy,” Plath turns to violence as the sole way to exorcise the influence of her father, Hughes, and patriarchy by driving a stake into its “fat black heart” (76). Plath’s use of “Daddy” suggests that violence began with her father’s sudden and violent death, which loomed throughout her life and her poetry. As the dominant male in Plath’s life and literary imagination, Hughes continued this violence and cemented the figure of a violent patriarch in Plath’s psyche. Plath responds to the violent patriarch here, and asserts that her own violence is the most effective tool to exorcise the power that constricts female expression. For Hughes, Crow contains a wealth of violent poems.

5 Addressed to Lisa and Leonard Baskin.
“Song for a Phallus,” for example, cannot escape images of amputated genitalia (16, 38), axe murders (51), guts (63), and blood gushing from buckets (67).

Violence, as a theme, links Ariel and Crow. Plath’s Ariel retaliates against Hughes because she perceived him as a threat—a dangerous influence—to her authorial voice. However, Crow may be considered as an act of retaliation for her violence in Ariel, which would indicate Plath created their violent relationship and forced violence on Hughes. The texts “call and respond” to each other in such a way that they there is no clear originator of violence. For example, Plath’s “Daddy” sees violence the primary method to overcome threats, but Hughes’s “Song for a Phallus” answers Plath’s call and questions the effectiveness of her violence. Once the speaker has killed her father, she declares, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (80). This assertion necessitated that the daddy figure be killed to allow the female speaker to finally assert herself. “Song for a Phallus” answers Plath’s call. After a series of violent sequences that attempt to free the protagonist from damnation, he stumbles on “himself curled up inside [his mother’s womb]/As if he had never been bore” (78-9). By stumbling upon his fetal self, the protagonist completes a futile cycle of violence from which he can never really free himself. Responding to Plath, Hughes suggests that violent attempts to free one’s self from “fixed” situations (like women’s oppression in patriarchy) are ultimately futile.

Psychoanalytic theory’s “mirrored double”

Donald Woods Winnicott in his paper “Creativity and its Origins” (1971) constructed a more complex relationship between the poet and muse. Like Graves, he divided the universe along gender lines, but Winnicott internalized the gender division and asserted that both male and female elements existed in the psyches of both men and women (66). The female element
represents the “ontological center” of every person, the capacity of being in existence (82). According to Winnicott, “female-ness” is constructed in terms of desire—not the action of desire but the thing that is desired. The female element thus resembles Graves’s “White Goddess” because it is the object of desire the poet addresses. Winnicott associated the male element with “the concerns of doing and relating—pursuit, performance, and possession” (82). The male element represents the actor and the principle of “doing.” It also originates from the female element as if the feminine had given “birth” to the masculine. The masculine distinguishes itself as the actor, which departs from Graves’s theories. Graves had argued that the female “White Goddess” is the possessor—the agent driving creativity, whereas psychoanalytic theory posits that the male element is the “possessor” because it is “naturally” associated with action. Male poets represent the “actor” and are assumed to be the “natural” poetic creator; conversely, female poets represent “being” and not “doing.” Therefore, creating poetry seems outside women’s capability.

In Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë (1990), Irene Taylor asserted the following:

The muse is a signifier, replacing the objective world…and at the same time a projection of the poet’s own inner female element, his “being” from which he has split off as part of the price of growing up male—of becoming not a “mother” but a man. Quite appropriately then this…muse regularly appears as the poet’s…mirroring double of himself, and yet the beloved mediator through whom

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6 Winnicott draws on Carl Jung who understood “being” as a feminine trait because he used the Latin term for being—“anima”—to describe the ontological state. “Anima” is a feminine word.
7 Winnicott draws on Sigmund Freud who equated “doing” with the “active” sex act of phallic penetration of the vagina.
he can remain in touch with all that is beyond himself. She is the human-formed locus of both earth and eternity, both Mother Nature and the Heaven. (20)

As a replacement for the objective world, the muse is the male poet’s feminine mirror image. Taylor’s assertion drew heavily from Lacan’s pre-Oedipal “mirror stage.” A subject, upon viewing him/herself in a mirror for the first time as an infant, first recognizes his/her body, resulting in an irresolvable division of “self” and “other.” The “other” then becomes a source of conflict because the individual sees the “other” as whole, but the “self” as divided. In the mirror stage, women especially threaten the self because the Mother, the external signifier of the female, appears whole and omnipotent, but the infant self remains fractured. Throughout adolescence, the individual believes the self can compensate for its fragmentary nature only by fulfilling biological destiny. Male identity especially draws on supposedly “natural” domination tendencies to subjugate the female element in his identity. Taylor’s Lacanian-informed analysis asserts that the male poet must split off his female element so he can claim his masculine identity as a creator and thus create poetry. The object of his projection is typically a woman because she externally represents the “othered,” female element of natural “being.” After projecting his feminine element, the female muse reconciles his conflict by submitting to his power and being possessed. This reconciliation produces harmony as biological destiny has been fulfilled (masculine has subjugated feminine), and this produced harmony then inspires the poet to write.

Lacan’s and Taylor’s analysis illustrates how Hughes’s “Crow and Mama” ironically renders the relationship between the male poet and his female muse. From the poem’s first image, violence nearly overpowers the reader: “When Crow cried his mother’s ear/Scorched to a stump” (1-2). The fact that Crow’s “cry” inflicts harm on his mother suggests that his primary weapon is language. As such, Crow represents the poet—the quintessential manipulator of
language. Lacan’s framework situates the Mother as a threat, which explains why Crow attacks her—he must distance himself from her so that he can claim an identity as a “man.” Though he repeatedly attempts to kill her, she paradoxically inspires him because she provides a physical target for his aggression. In a bizarre way, Crow needs his mother just as the poet needs his muse to focus his creativity. Crow’s aggression acts out the poet’s projection of his feminine element, which he “splits off,” according to Taylor, from his own psyche so that he can use it to focus his creativity. The irony of the poem arrives in its final lines. After appearing to “kill off” the mother, Crow crash lands on the moon only to crawl out from “under his mother’s buttocks” (25). Thus, even as Crow attempts to shed his mother’s presence it seems he can never escape her.

Psychoanalytic theory threatens female poets because it relies on essentialized divisions of male and female, which characterize men as “actors” and women as only “beings.” Taylor attempted to attribute agency to the female poet, suggesting that a female poet could invert the gender system to generate her own creative force (22). She can project her masculine energies on a male figure and then write poetry by possessing him, as the male poet does with the female element. A female poet can therefore seemingly invert the gendered paradigm without “great distortion of meaning.” However, such a simple inversion fails because it does not resist traditionally gendered understandings of male and female elements. The inversion will fail because when a woman projects her element of “doing,” she robs herself of the ability to act as agent. She, therefore, cannot claim an identity as a poet because she only “is”; she cannot “act.” Additionally, projecting her masculine element may produce problems for the female poet. When Taylor considered the identity-experience of young women, she suggested that “the feeling that a male element has been projected from [her] being may seem less an enrichment than an
impoverishment, a loss of wholeness through the splitting off of some ‘masculine’ potency that had once been more fully their own” (25-6). A female poet can project her masculine element, but her loss of “potency” threatens her agency.

A psychoanalytic discourse generates anxiety for the female poet, but she still writes. In other words, the female poet’s fear that she cannot write is not psychological at all; rather, it is fundamentally linguistic. In her article “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972), Adrienne Rich exposed this linguistic trap:

[T]o write poetry…there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive….Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives…nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. (23)

According to Rich, changing the vocabulary of the discourse will change the problem, perhaps even erase the problem altogether. A female poet creates her own understanding and vocabulary of creativity because a male-controlled discourse silences her access to creativity. Hélène Deutsch, the first famous female psychoanalyst and former student of Freud, noted that girls felt they had once had—then lost—penises (i.e. a visibly masculine element). However, her studies suggested that such loss fantasies did not express a sense of impotence. Rather, her studies recorded the loss as “examples ‘of the girl’s ‘inner perception’ of her own masculinity” (83). A female poet’s sense of her masculine and feminine elements proved to be inextricably linked. Her feminine identity did not necessitate distinction from the mother; it matured as a complex mixture of masculine and feminine elements—both actor and object. Therefore, a female poet’s act of projection does not have to be as symmetrical as a male poet’s. She projects the constant
tension between “being” and “doing” as her mirrored double. She incorporates both masculine and feminine elements so that her muse, like her own psyche, can be both actor and object. Rich argues, “it is finally the woman’s sense of herself—embattled, possessed—that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy” (19).

Both Deutsch and Rich expose Plath’s “Ariel” as an exploration of female poets and the creation of their muses, especially considering the transformation of the speaker into the arrow in the final lines of the poem (26-27). The arrow is phallic in shape and obliquely resembles a pen—the phallic signifier of male-controlled language. Critics have long interpreted the female speaker’s transformation as indicative of Plath’s penis envy. Being a woman, critics argued, Plath longed to control the power of male language associated with the phallus. However, the lines indicate no longing; the speaker makes a simple “I am” statement—she is the arrow. Deutsch’s theories read the speaker’s “I am” statement as a recognition-moment where she acknowledges her inner perception of a masculine element. Rich nuances Deutsch’s theories by suggesting that saying “I am” not only recognizes an inner masculine energy, but also Plath’s own ability to transform reality through language. By claiming the signified power of the arrow (and pen) by saying “I am the arrow,” Plath seizes her own masculine power while, paradoxically, energizing her female poetic self. Plath’s muse is herself, and she has created her muse by recognizing how she contains both masculine and feminine elements in her psyche.

Psychoanalytic theory understands creativity as a kind of “therapy” in which the poet projects conflict onto another, repossesses that conflict through interaction with his/her so-called

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8 Rich relied on similar essentialized assumptions about gender that psychoanalysis used to silence female poets. By claiming that women access a specifically “female” energy, she did not challenge the underlying essentialism that divides men and women. However, Rich empowers the essentialized woman, and provided a critical response to sexist psychoanalytic theories. Her language, while problematic in the face of more recent poststructuralist feminist criticism, captures the prevailing essentialist discourse Plath used to construct her identity as female poet responding to the patriarchal threat.
“muse,” who has “fixed” conflict, and then writes poetry. Even female poets project and repossess themselves, though their process is more nuanced than male poets. However, the muse is another human being and often suffers from a similar sense of conflict and he/she cannot reconcile the conflict. Though the poet believes it to be fixed, his/her conflict is only displaced. Repossession of the self develops a paradox that blurs the distinction between the self and the other. The muse is not a distinctly separate identity, but the poet’s mirrored double, a projection of the self. Therefore, the self possesses the self-externalized, and no difference remains between poet and muse. However, neither Plath nor Hughes performed only as a muse; rather, both occupied the dual identity as muse and poet. As they wrote, there were two poets acting as two agents drawing each other closer together. The continual process of displacing their conflicts on each other provided them with the feeling that they were merging into one identity. They gained a unique perspective as each other’s recurring “other self,” and they began to believe this role gave them access to understand the intricacies of each other’s psyche. Over time, they felt their identities merge together, which gave the sense as if they were writing from “one brain.”

Looking at Plath and Hughes’s texts allows psychoanalytic theory to expose how they each came to externally signify internal conflict as a muse. Hughes inspired Plath to write the *Ariel* poems in an almost demonic way, by taking possession of her imagination after he (like her father) left her. His abandonment triggered in her psyche emotions associated with her father’s death, and he became the external signifier that focused her attack on her own fears and conflicts, specifically those originating in her sense of feminine inadequacy. As in “Lady Lazarus,” Plath used language to empower her feminine self, chanting “Out of ash, /I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” (82-84). For Hughes, Plath externally signified his muse in the way she represented his contrary. Like Blake, who said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793)
“without contraries there is no progression,” Hughes believed contraries were creative. In Crow, Hughes draws on several contraries to drive his poems—masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, language/instinct, and life/death. For example, in “Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door,” Hughes compares the natural and the artificial. Upon looking at the world, Crow (the eponymous protagonist) “looked in front of his feet at the little stream/Chugging on like an auxiliary motor” (4-5). The contraries here are the natural (the stream) and the artificial (the auxiliary motor). Using a simile, Hughes merges the two so that the natural becomes artificial. The use of “like,” however, implies an incomplete transformation so the stream retains some of its naturalness while blending with the mechanical. When viewed in conjunction with the rest of the poem, the stream/motor image introduces Hughes’s larger attempt to deconstruct contraries. Throughout the poem, he continues to merge what first appear to be contraries. In his life, Plath came to represent Hughes’s “contrary,” and thus a general source of inspiration. She visibly signified his female other and, after her suicide, was an external representation of “death” that contrasted to his “life.” He envisioned her in a way that conformed to a psychoanalytic paradigm—she was an external representation of his internal contraries. In Crow, he uses her death to contrast with his life; ultimately, Hughes suggests, as he does in “Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door,” that the boundary between contraries is not as firm as he initially conceived.
Chapter 2: Poetic Influence

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom makes a startling demand: “Let us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to ‘understand’ any single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet’s deliberate misinterpretation, *as a poet*, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general” (43). According to Bloom, a poem is not an individuated entity. Rather, a poet writes in dialogue with other poems, echoing “precursor” poets. Bloom articulates a provocative method of analyzing poetry as a continuous transfiguration of preexisting poetic language and the ideas it represents. A new poem, according to his point of view, interprets or responds to preceding or prevailing poetic tropes. A new poet is only nominally individuated; in fact, he/she creates (often unknowingly) “common texts” based on connections to poetic history. Plath and Hughes influenced each other as a muse, and Bloom’s theories illuminate how their mutual influence prompted both to engage with how they figured poetic concepts. As such, both poets’ texts contain readily identifiable revisions of each other, even more easily identified than new poets who buffered their precursor’s influence with time.

Poetic influence and the poetic family

“Influence” is a troubling term, so Bloom establishes a history to understand its more contemporary usage. He says, “As first used, to be influenced meant to receive an ethereal fluid that affected one’s character and destiny…a power—divine and moral—later simply a secret power—exercised itself, in defiance of all that had seemed voluntary in one” (26-27). The description of influence as a divine power recalls constructions of the muse, a divine figure accessed through secret rituals that possessed the poet and subverted the belief that the poet was a voluntary agent. Influence retained its associations with the more vague “acts of God” until Coleridge and the Romantics. From that particular moment forward, according to Bloom, “the
word has substantially our meaning in the context of literature” (27). As it is applied to literature influence continues to challenge the notion of voluntary acts of creativity because a poet’s precursors determine or predestine how poets write the way they do. However, Bloom ascribes agency and power to what he terms “strong, authentic” poets. He argues, “Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets, —always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (30).

“Strong, authentic” poets can act freely—and perversely—by misreading. Without misreading, poetry cannot exist.

According to Bloom, misreading leads to a “Second Birth” where the poet realizes that he/she has the capacity to write poetry and enjoy such an activity. The poet’s “Second Birth” nominally occurs as a result of intense self-reflection, yet Bloom notes, “it is an act never complete in itself” (25). External poetic influences always affect the poet, and, as a result, he/she develops “the sense—amazing, agonizing, delighting—of other poets; as felt in the depths of the all-but-perfect solipsist…. The poet is condemned to learn his [her] profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves.” (26). Bloom suggests here that the poet subjects him/herself to the influence of other poets,⁹ and the poet’s “Second Birth” can never be free from connection to others. The specifics of outside influences dictate the manner in which that process takes place. Literary history and the ability to access certain kinds of poetry (which may be blocked by language barriers or what the poet has read) necessarily limit what a poet produces. In spite of these specifics, Bloom argues, “The poem is within [the poet], yet he [she] experiences the shame and splendor of being found by poems…outside him [her]” (26). He implies that all poets have an unacknowledged reservoir of poetry hidden away in their psyches.

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⁹ Bloom later claims that “poets” as identities are less important than the poems that are produced by said poets. The poet is not responding to another poet, per se, rather the poet produced by that poet.
but that poetic reservoir remains dormant if an outsider does not prompt the poet to tap into those inner poems. Thus, other poets create their successors as they influence and evoke inner poems.

Bloom metaphorically constructs influence as an Oedipal relationship between the precursor and the new poet. The poet’s second birth casts the poet as the literary son and the precursor as the father. The muse figures as the poet’s mother and the precursor’s wife because the muse’s marriage to the precursor poet generated the poetry used to create (i.e. “give birth to”) the new poet. Influence bonds these familial elements together. Also, influence’s necessary limitations threaten to obscure the new poet’s voice and render it “unoriginal” or “derivative.” The “anxiety of influence” results from such a threat. This anxiety is the fear that the precursor poet will completely neuter the new poet and prevent the new poet from achieving a place in literary history. The anxiety of influence prevents many poets from even writing, but according to Bloom a “strong” poet’s task is to overcome the “anxiety of influence,” assert an independent voice, and offer his/her unique response and/or revision of poetic tradition (30). The strong poet employs the misprision to overcome the anxiety of influence and contribute to literary history.

Bloom’s concept of “second birth” illustrates how Hughes gave birth to Plath’s “Lady Lazarus.” While she initially characterizes herself as a victim by comparing herself to a Jew, the speaker invites her enemy to peel off her victimized façade and reveals that her “victim self” is dead (9-15). After describing several images of suicide, she ironically claims power from her death, saying, “Dying/Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (43-45). Throughout the poem, she addresses an unnamed “enemy,” and as she reaches her ultimate transformation she finally addresses her enemy: “So, so Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy” (66-66). “Herr” indicates that her enemy is male, but more importantly “Herr” is a German form of address. The German address coupled with “Doktor” recalls Plath’s own father—the Germanic
Dr. Otto Plath who was a university professor who studied bees. In Plath’s imagination, Otto represented the faults of patriarchy that had wounded her childhood, and, in the poem, “Herr Doktor” represents an oppressive patriarchy. Hughes does not enter the poem until the speaker catalogues her possessions: “A cake of soap/A wedding ring/ A gold filling” (73-75). The “wedding ring” metonymically refers to Plath’s marriage to Hughes, and also characterizes marriage as a tool of patriarchy and something comparable to Nazi fascism. She then warns her patriarchal enemy to “beware,” as she rises up from death to “eat men like air” (83).

Hughes explicitly enters “Lady Lazarus” only in its last lines, but he functions as a kind of presiding spirit throughout the poem. With the wounds of their separation fresh in Plath’s mind, Hughes served as a physical representation of patriarchy. Additionally, Hughes garnered comparatively more success than Plath while they both were writing, which exacerbated her feelings that, as a poet, she would never achieve success because Hughes consistently overshadowed her. Thus, Hughes occupied space in Plath’s psyche as both her husband and as a poet. She was consistently “aware” of him, in the Bloomian sense, as new poets are aware of their precursors. Hughes focuses her rage, which seethes in the poem. Thus, as the target of her rage, he induced Plath to write and inspired “Lady Lazarus.”

Bloom’s theories also expose Plath’s influence over Hughes in “Crow Tries the Media.” The poem opens: “He wanted to sing about her” (1). The speaker never specifies the identity of the “her”; however, the poem suggests it addresses Hughes’s role as the executor of Plath’s estate. The speaker says, “He did not even want words/Waving their long tails in public/With their prostitute’s exclamations” (4-6). The public vilified Hughes, as the co-executor of her estate, for what was considered mistreatment of Plath’s texts. He often described feeling mortified that his private marriage was displayed so publicly, and, over time, Hughes began to

10 Hughes’s sister, Olwyn, and Plath’s mother, Aurelia, were also executors.
characterize this public attention as a “mess of publicity” (*Letters* 364). When the speaker in “Crow Tries the Media” characterizes “public” words as having “prostitute exclamations,” he recalls Hughes’s own anxious feelings as he dealt with the public portrayal of his private life. More importantly, perhaps, is that throughout the whole poem, the speaker attempts to “sing” about the unnamed “her,” which suggests that the speaker is attempting to describe the unnamed “her” in poetic language. The speaker’s attempt to “sing” about “her” parallels Hughes’s own attempts to create Plath’s public image. As the poem continues, the speaker’s attempts to sing repeatedly damage “her,” and ultimately “her shape dimmed” (23). As the speaker ends with his subject dimming, he suggests that his attempts to construct “her” out of language have failed. Hughes obviously retained guilt about Plath’s death. In a letter sent to Aurelia Plath immediately after Plath’s suicide, Hughes described his guilt in candid prose: “I don’t ever want to be forgiven. I don’t mean that I shall become a public shrine of mourning and remorse, I would sooner become the opposite. But if there is an eternity, I am damned in it” (*Letters* 215).

**The violence of misprision**

Within Bloom’s Oedipal family romance, misprision is the critical Oedipal act performed to assert a poet’s unique voice (3-4). Misprision becomes analogous to killing the father, i.e. robbing a precursor of poetic power and using that power to generate a unique poem. Additionally, misreading draws inspiration from his/her precursor’s muse in ways that mimic the rape of a wife, much like the Oedipal son’s urge to rape his mother. In this violent, Oedipal relationship, Bloom provides a succinct understanding of how poetic influence creates common texts out of violence. He suggests that a poet does not write individualized collections or even individual poems. Rather a poet engages with and is influenced by other poets, whether the poets are a part of past or present literary history. The poet and the precursor are wedded in a violent
marriage of contraries. The new poet must violently transgress, i.e. misread his/her father’s poetry to produces his/her own work. Additionally, in *The Breaking of the Vessels* (1982), Bloom asserts, “We say that to be alone with a book is to confront neither ourselves nor another. We lie. When you read, you confront either yourself, or another, and in either confrontation you seek power. Power over yourself, or another, but power. …Power, in the reading process is…a last brutal self-idealization” (13). Bloom’s use of “brutal” indicates that the creative process is not just a violent process between poets, but also within the poet. For the poet to construct his/her “ideal” creative self, the self that can overcome the anxiety of influence, he/she must violently break and create unique poetry that will secure that poet’s place in literary history. Bloom argues that such violence originates in the poet’s survival instinct:

> When a poet experiences incarnation *qua* poet, he experiences anxiety necessarily towards any danger that might end him as a poet. The anxiety of influence is so terrible because it is both a kind of separation anxiety and the beginning of a…fear of death.…To give justification we need to tread on…our timeless human fear of mortality. (*Anxiety* 58)

Bloom’s “separation anxiety” is analogous to Freud’s concept of separation anxiety that the infant experiences as the mother quits breastfeeding because both anxieties are based on dependency. The poet is like the breastfeeding infant in that he/she needs a Muse and precursor poets to nurture his/her burgeoning talent. Such a nurturing relationship cannot last indefinitely. The poet finds that he/she must separate from the precursor, and that separation comes with the threat of failure as the poet moves away from the safe, nurturing environment established by the

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11 This particular text builds on *Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*. He makes similar (if more complicated) assertions in this text, but he particularly focuses on the violence between generations of poets and internal violence raging in the poet him/herself.

12 The “survival instinct” presupposes a Darwinian discourse on violence—the struggle to survive.
precursor. As the poet splits from the precursor’s influence, he/she finds that the precursor could “kill” his/her new poems. The precursor’s influence threatens to overshadow the new poet and literary history will forget the new poet, which is equal to poetic death. As such the poet is faced with a new “fear of death,” which comes from the fear of castration that a male child experiences as he recognizes the father as a violent rival. The precursor-as-father threatens to castrate the new poet’s works as he/she steps away from influence and establishes new poems. According to Bloom, the poet experiences this anxiety at a visceral level, and reacts by violently cutting him/herself from his/her precursor.

Bloom argues that a “strong” poet is a deliberate misinterpreter and takes great efforts to individuate him/herself from the poetic tradition by violently revising or reinterpreting cyclical concepts. The poet does not simply revise old concepts, however. Bloom argues, “ideas and images belong to discursiveness and to history, and are scarcely unique to poetry. Yet a poet’s stance, his Word, his imaginative identity, his whole being, must be unique to him, and remain unique, or he will perish, as poet” (71). The process of distinguishing the poetic self often appears to render a poet “ahead” of his/her time and, thus, nominally an “individual”; however, that poet is a product of his/her literary tradition at a particular historical moment. A poet is “weak” if he/she simply derives poetry from what came before. Even though history or trends limit a poet, he/she must distinguish him/herself as a contributory voice that adds a unique interpretation of unifying motifs, symbols, or themes in order to guarantee his/her survival into posterity. If a poet fails to provide a “strong” reinterpretation, he/she will drift out of the collective poetic memory.
Bloom’s theories expose Plath and Hughes’s necessary reliance on each other to create their poetry. Critic Neil Roberts argues, “their writing life was a common endeavor…. [I]t would even be true…to say that they created a common text in which many important motifs cannot be straightforwardly assigned to one or the other writer” (157, my italics). Both “encouraged, criticized, and reacted to each other, and in the process wrote their own work” (Uroff 6). Mutual encouragement, critique, and reaction resulted in poetry, and such a process encouraged a nurturing atmosphere that allowed both poets to write. The creation of such an atmosphere resembles the precursor’s nurturance of the new poet because it emphasizes influence, and, because they turned to each other, this process confirmed their mutual influence.

Plath and Hughes articulated their dynamic, inter-textual relationship as Bloom might—in terms of “love.” In her journals, Plath gushingly admitted, “[Ted] sets the sea of my life steady, flooding it with the deep rich color of his mind and his love” (Journals 287). Plath suggested that love legitimized Hughes’s profound influence, and her allusion to “flooding” indicated that his influence (or influx) added strength and power to her own intellectual “sea.” Hughes, also somewhat gushingly, wrote to Plath early in their marriage, “I have read somewhere in Freud that when a person is suddenly deprived of someone he loves, and has built into his life, working power often fails temporarily” (Letters 61). In A Map of Misreading (1975), Bloom argues, “Behind any Scene of Writing, at the start of every intertextual encounter, there is this unequal initial love” (51, my italics). Bloom equates the turbulent passions of love with the turbulent passions of influence. Love drew Plath and Hughes together—physically and textually. When they wrote their poems, they wrote in dialogue with each other, thus creating a “common text.”
Both Plath and Hughes admitted to anxiety about each other’s overbearing influence and, as such, feared becoming “weak” poets, incapable of expressing their unique voices (Clark “Willful Revisionism” 175-76). Plath wrote in her diary, “My danger [when attempting to write], partly, I think, is becoming too dependent on Ted” (Journals 401). A month after Plath’s suicide, Hughes wrote to her mother Aurelia, “The particular conditions of our marriage, the marriage of two people so openly under the control of deep psychic abnormalities as both of us were, meant that we finally reduce each other to a state where our actions and normal states of mind were like madness” (Letters 215). In this particular letter, Hughes normalized what would be seen as madness. Their marriage seemed to exacerbate preexisting madness, and their mutual influence threatened to devour their sanity.

On several occasions, Plath and Hughes attempted to separate themselves from each other. Plath admitted in her journals that she reveled in the time she spent away from Hughes, and perhaps Hughes’s extramarital affair with Assia Weevil was due in part to an attempt to break from Plath’s influence. In light of such distinct efforts, many critics place Plath and Hughes in a deadlocked battle. Certainly both poets resented or were threatened by the other’s influence. However, despite their best efforts to separate themselves, both continually subjected each other to their poetic influence and neither could establish a poetic identity entirely independent of the other.

Plath and Hughes’s back-and-forth misprision suggests that they needed each other to generate their texts. For example, there is a complex relationship between Plath’s poem “Ariel” and Hughes’s “Dawn’s Rose,” which appears in Crow. Dawn, as a poetic concept, links Ariel and Crow in a conversation. In many of the Ariel poems, dawn conquers night’s death threat and offers Plath new possibilities to reinvent her textual self as a powerfully violent, creative, and
self-destructive force. The *Crow* poems, however, figure dawn as part of a predetermined natural cycle. While it overcomes darkness, dawn does not break down inevitable laws that govern universal violence. In fact, dawn simply starts the “natural,” inevitable, diurnal cycle over again. Hughes’s “Dawn’s Rose” in *Crow* misprizes many of Plath’s images that describe dawn in “Ariel.” Hughes’s use of her images, confirms the way that Plath maintained influence over his work even after her death.

In “Ariel,” the speaker begins at night’s end, just before the sun rises. She notes the “Stasis in darkness/Then the substanceless blue/Pour of tor and distances” (1-3). “Stasis,” “substanceless,” and “distances” suggest a creative impotence brought on by lack of a focus. She is “substanceless,” like the dawn sky without the sun, and robbed of the ability to write “Tor” (a Scottish colloquial reference to a burial mound) suggests a kind of textual death—perhaps brought on by the confusing or blinding night and inability to create poetry. Additionally, the speaker worries that she “cannot catch” a thought (9). The succeeding enjambed lines carry the reader through an unfocused stream-of-consciousness, each thought expressing an inability to create. The enjambment, however, pulls the reader through the speaker’s lack of focus. The reader is not stopped by end punctuation (which would allow the reader to conclude that the poem will continue unfocused) and the speaker arrives at her focus by the end of the enjambed lines.

The speaker finally gains focus as she is violently hauled “through the air” (16). This particularly violent action recalls a traumatic horseback-riding event in Cambridge in which Plath was nearly trampled beneath a galloping horse. Plath’s horse in Devon was named “Ariel,”

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13 At the time Plath wrote the *Ariel* poems she was taking sleeping pills, and in the hours just before down she drank cup after cup of coffee/tea, building her physical anxiety while she waited for the effects of her sleeping pills to wear off (Stevenson 261).
14 A technique Plath was well aware of as an avid reader of both Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who are credited with creating the technique and who heavily employed the technique throughout their careers.
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and was quite different from “Sam” the name of the Cambridge horse (Uroff 165). The near-
death experience with Sam fascinated Plath; it provided a particularly compelling memory from
which she could draw inspiration. Also, because her Devon horse was named “Ariel,” Plath
linked her with Shakespeare’s creative spirit from *The Tempest*. Additionally, the horse image
alludes to the mythological Pegasus (Littleton 147). The word “Pegasus” etymologically links to
“spring, well” (pēgē) and, according to classical myth, everywhere the winged horse struck his
hoof in the earth, an inspiring spring burst forth (such as the well of Muses on Mount Helicon)
(Littleton 147). Infused with such inspiring energy, the horse image shifts the poem toward a
focus, and the poem picks up its energy.

The horse image in “Ariel” misprizes Hughes’s earlier poem, “The Horses” (published in
*The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957). While climbing through the woods just before dawn, the Hughes-
like speaker in “The Horses” comes across a “dense grey” herd of horses that are “Megalith-still”
(9-10). “The Horses” also provides an inspirational dawn image, which connects movement and
re-birth with the dawn as the sun “erupts” and tears through the sky like an atom bomb (18-20).
However, the sun does not move the horses:

> There, still they stood,
> But now steaming and glistening under the flow of light,

> Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves
> Stirring under a thaw while all around them

> The frost showed its fires. But still they made no sound.
> Not one snorted or stamped,

> Their hung heads patient as the horizons,
> High over valleys in the red levelling rays (27-34).

While the sun throws new light on the horses, they remain “still” and “patient.” The horses
suggest a sign of sustained power and control. They maintain stability despite the violent,
unstoppable cycles of the natural world. In “Ariel,” Plath takes Hughes’s pre-existing horse image and revises it by drawing from her own experience to shift the meaning of the horses to a deadly, inspiring muse that provides energy and a suicidal movement to her thoughts.

In “Ariel,” the action’s sudden shift kills the speaker. Her death allows her to unpeel her unfocused façade, revealing “Dead hands, dead stringencies” (21). The death of her hands refers to the inability to write, but the dead “stringencies” indicates that the restrictions on her creativity are now also dead. Also, Plath draws on erotic associations with hands to recall her past erotic marriage to Hughes and his hands touching her body. With his touch came the “stringencies” or constraints of their marriage, which Plath often felt limited her own ability to write. At the time Plath was writing “Ariel” she and Hughes had separated. His hands and their marriage were in a sense “dead” or absent, and Plath was free to write poetry, though she needed to destroy her former, constrained self in the process.

The death of her former restrictions signals the speaker’s radical transformation:

And I
am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of the morning. (27-31)

The powerful “I” statement asserts a focused creativity and poetic drive, and her straightforward identification suggests that Plath’s poetic self has shifted from a tool (such as a bow) to an aggressive weapon (the arrow). The choice of the phallic arrow recalls a pen—a phallic image in itself and signifier of male poetic power. Plath seizes such power and identifies herself as a poet. The transformation is “at one” with the dawn implying that the dawn triggered the transformation because its violent burst of energy has stripped away former selves, her married
self in particular. The speaker also cleverly puns on the similarity between “Eye” and “I.” Her arrow is aimed not only at the dawn (the “cauldron of the morning”), but also at her own “Eye.” Also, as the arrow is directed toward an “Eye,” the image suggests a bull’s eye. This target could be Ted Hughes’s eye (as Plath’s own target and enemy) and Plath’s father’s eye. As the target is the sun, both men are unified as a muse, providing creative and destructive inspiration for Plath. The flight is characterized as “suicidal,” and the pun indicates a death of the former, poetically impotent self that was static at the beginning of the poem. The arrow is a recreated self (a product of the dawn) that has now created a focused poem.

“Dawn’s Rose” most noticeably edits the narrative direction of “Ariel.” Rather than stasis, the poem opens with movement, the “melting [of] an old frost moon” (1). The speaker completely ignores feelings of being lost, and instead powerfully recognizes an action: the melting of the frost. However, the speaker mutes his thoughts. They certainly have a direction, yet that direction is a weak, almost crippled one. The speaker notices “a crow talking to stony skylines” (3). “Stony” implies unfeelingness and unresponsiveness. The crow may talk, but no one hears him; his speech is useless. The speaker notes:

Desolate is the crow’s puckered cry  
As an old woman’s mouth  
When the eyelids have finished  
And the hills continue. (4-7)

Characterizing the crow’s cry as “desolate” suggests that language is essentially rendered impotent by natural cycles. Language dies, as the old woman does, but nature continues to cycle, just as the hills “continue.” The speaker proposes the antithesis to the effect of dawn in “Ariel.” Ultimately, “Dawn’s Rose” closes in “rainy twilight.” “Twilight” suggests a double meaning: the opening and closing of the day’s cycle. There is no dramatic transformation resulting from dawn.

We recognize Hughes as Plath’s target as she characterizes the sun as the “red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning” (30-31), which is borrowed from Hughes’s “The Horses” which characterizes the dawn as a “red” eruption (19).
Dawn is merely a natural part of a repetitious cycle. Dawn may indeed “melt the old frost,” but it cannot inspire a transformation. The mythologizing of dawn seems to be more a product of language than of the sun, and impotent in the face of natural cycles exemplified by the day.

“Dawn’s Rose” also notably misprises the image of a child’s cry used in “Ariel.” In “Ariel,” a child’s cry “melts in the wall” (25). Plath undoubtedly drew inspiration from her personal experience with the dawn. As she wrote “Ariel” she was living in a cramped London flat, writing in the small hours of the morning just before her children woke for the day. Her children’s cry would have signaled dawn and, consequently, the end of her poetry writing and her transformation from poet to mother. Therefore, the image of the “child’s cry” clearly signifies a transformative moment for her poetic self. “Dawn’s Rose” revises this meaning: “A cry/Wordless/As the newborn baby’s grieving/On the steely scales” (8-10). The speaker characterizes the cry as “wordless,” thus unfocused and ineffective. The simile also suggests that “cries” are as effectively meaningless as a baby’s grieving. A baby cannot grieve to the extent an adult can because the baby lacks the language to articulate such grief; additionally, the “grieving” is met by unfeeling and unresponsive “steely scales,” which do not shift as a result of that expressed grief. The scale image also obliquely evokes an image of a baby actually being weighed on a scale. It is as if the speaker is blind justice holding up the scales and weighing the baby’s innocence against the violent reality of adulthood. Using the “scales” also implies an interest in “natural balance, i.e. a Newtonian belief in equal reactions for every action. Describing the scales as “steely” suggests that the natural balance continues, regardless of its effects on humanity. The speaker in “Dawn’s Rose” underscores his belief in natural, fixed cycles that continue unchanged by any human cry. Because he neuters the power of the child’s cry, Hughes revises the transformative effect of the child’s cry in “Ariel.”
Both poems incorporate violent weaponry to further their respective arguments with the concept of dawn. The gun image in “Dawn’s Rose” revises the arrow image in “Ariel.” “Dawn’s Rose” ends with a hunting scene:

As the dull gunshot and its after râle  
Among conifers, in rainy twilight.

Or the suddenly dropped, heavily dropped  
Star of blood on the fat leaf. (12-15)

The hunting scene recalls the close of “Ariel,” which ended with an arrow flying into the “red/ Eye, the cauldron of the morning.” Both describe violent action ending in blood. However, Hughes’s poem revises the effect of destructive and self-destroying action. Characterized as “dull,” the gunshot loses some of its energy. Also, the gunshot leaves an “after râle” (a kind of weakened echo) that is muffled by the surrounding conifers. The end result is the same (violence, as indicated by the blood dropping on the leaf), but the action is not as powerful as the violent transformation associated with the arrow in “Ariel.”

Ultimately, these weapons suggest a kind of textual “duel at dawn” launched between the two poems. Plath’s arrow carries movement and energy, but Hughes’s “dull gunshot” decreases the energy behind the action. The argument between the two poets indicates a common text. The images in “Ariel” imply that language encourages transformation and the creation of an aggressive textual self, capable of overcoming the creative death associated with night. These are starting points for “Dawn’s Rose,” which casts language as an impotent tool drowned out by unchanging natural cycles. Both poems assert identifiable, oppositional theses regarding language and, as such, make up the two poles of the conversational duel that takes place between these texts.
Chapter 3: *Ariel and Crow* as a common text

Major Plath scholars, including Marjorie Perloff, Susan Van Dyne, Jacqueline Rose, and Lynda Bundzten, use Hughes’s questionable editorial decisions\(^\text{16}\) to justify figuring him as an aggressive agent of the “Modernist literary patriarchy.” According to these critics, the steps Hughes took violated Plath’s texts and attempted to silence or reinvent her textual self. In response to such a critique, more recent Hughes scholars have observed, “What is often missing from these scholars’ compelling discussion is an analysis of the ways in which Plath looted Hughes’s poetic corpus” (Clark “Tracking the Thought Fox” 101). Even new biographically informed readings of their work perpetuate an image of their textual relationship that underscores their rivalry and mutual pirating. According to these readings, one poet maintained power over the other’s text (sometimes it was Plath, sometimes it was Hughes) and various poems are viewed as energetic assertions of an independent poetic self.

In contrast, Margaret Dickie Uroff in *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1979) boldly asserted that their collections should be read “as parts of a continuing debate…in which Plath’s reservations and Hughes’s assertions play against each other” (12). Following in Uroff’s footsteps, Diane Middlebrook asserted a similarly influence-focused framework in her paper “The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes: call and response” (2006). She argued, “Working side by side, they developed a dynamic of mutual influence that produced the poems we read today. This aspect of their bond can be tracked in their poetry from the months of their courtship through the years of their marriage and separation” (156). Middlebrook’s claim that Plath and Hughes had a “mutual” influence added nuance to Uroff’s thesis, yet still ignored the fluid

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\(^{16}\) Such as rearranging Plath’s *Ariel* manuscript, burning her last journal, labeling her pre-Cambridge work as “juvenilia,” and insisting that her “real self” appeared only in the *Ariel* poems. Van Dyne curtailed her vilification of Hughes and acknowledged the limitations of biographical readings in her paper “The problem of biography” (2006), yet she maintained an emphasis on Plath’s power in response to Hughes and continued to ground her thesis in biography.
influence shared between Plath and Hughes. While Middlebrook recognized that their influence shifted according to biographic events (courtship, marriage, and eventually separation), she fixed these periods of influence. Additionally, Middlebrook limited Plath’s ability to influence Hughes to her death. As a text, Plath superseded time and influenced Hughes well after her suicide, as evidenced by his publication of *Birthday Letters* (1998), a series of poems dedicated to their relationship. In effect, she created a power structure that figured one poet’s influence as stronger than the other at a given historical point,\(^\text{17}\) which still imposed a hierarchal power structure onto their relationship. A hierarchal power structure misunderstands their relationship. Neither poet was particularly “weak” or overwhelmingly “strong.” As much as Hughes may have influenced Plath or vice versa, neither could ever fully escape influence and fully emerge as the “stronger” poet. They wrote together, creating strength in their unity.

**Critiquing adulthood’s milestones: “The Applicant” and “A Kill”**

*Crow* continues many of *Ariel*’s narratives, “picking up” where Plath “left off.” Both *Ariel* and *Crow* critique important cultural markers of adulthood, such as wifehood or childbirth, by critically exposing these markers’ violent underpinnings. *Ariel*’s “The Applicant” ironically de-romanticizes wifehood, reducing it to a “commodity market” where male consumers buy and sell women’s objectified bodies. In *Crow*, “A Kill” reduces the significance of birth; instead of celebrating a new life, the poem constructs birth as a violent betrayal of body, particularly focusing on the betrayal of the masculine body by the mother’s feminizing womb. “The Applicant” attacks wifehood, thus beginning Plath and Hughes’s project aimed at critiquing the importance of so-called milestones. “A Kill” continues the project by focusing on birth. Separately, both poems devalue these particular signifiers, but as a common text these poems aim at exposing the oppressive or violent realities of adulthood.

\(^{17}\) For example, Hughes’s influence was stronger than Plath’s during their courtship.
“The Applicant” is a multilevel conversation. It addresses the masculine consumer and locates him in a market where commodified women are exchanged for acceptance into oppressive patriarchy. It also one of Plath’s many poems where she dialogues with her divided self—the poet and the wife. In either scenario, “wife” figures as role that Plath mocks and devalues. The first two stanzas should be read as a whole in order to gain a broader picture of how the poem figures masculinity:

First, are you our sort of person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something’s missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. (1-10)

“Breasts” and “crotch” are ambiguous gender markers, which leaves readers not fully aware of exactly who the poet addresses. Plath could be addressing Hughes, the man who purchased her in the marriage market. Plath could also address herself her—her “domestic self” that was sold in the marriage market. The ambiguity opens the possibility for either reading. However, the opening question emphasizes a unified community in opposition to the individuated “you,” stands in front of the larger “our” and seeks to gain acceptance into an exclusive community. The following series of questions suggests the community requires bodily wholeness\(^\text{18}\) in order to be considered “our sort of person.” Furthermore, the phonetic similarity between “crutch” and “crotch” (differentiated by only one vowel) links bodily wholeness to sexual potency, and implies the community places emphasis on being sexually potent as well as “whole.” The

\(^{18}\) “Bodily wholeness” as a necessary for “adulthood” draws on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which argued that in order to have a neuroses-free life, the “normal” adult would have reconciled all bodily stages and achieved a whole sense of his body.
community looks for defects that could potentially exclude that person, and constructs the “you” as Frankenstein’s monster that requires the community’s aid in becoming “whole.” The “you” opens “your hand” and reveals emptiness, but the community appears to promise wholeness with the suggestion that empty hand will receive “a thing.” The command to “stop crying” is the first indication that these stanzas address masculinity because it recalls traditional understandings of maleness that dictate men do not cry. However, readers are not certain that the addressed “you” is a man until the following lines: “Here is a hand/To fill it [the opened hand] and willing/To bring teacups and roll away headaches/And do whatever you tell it” (10-12). Here, the poem draws on constructions of wifehood and femininity that place women subservient to men and creates the image of an objectified woman to be given to the “you.” These lines, more importantly, crystallize a hierarchy in readers’ minds: the “our” is a collective of heterosexual, married men—a collection of “marriage brokers”—who examine unmarried men to determine their value as husbands; the “you” is a heterosexual, unmarried man seeking to access the privileges of heterosexual marriage and patriarchy that allow him to control women; finally, “it” is the commodified woman that will help the man achieve wholeness and she is passed from the collective of married men to the unmarried man. The poem addresses a man at the very last line of the poem, which names the “you” as “My boy” (40).

The poem then proceeds to de-romanticize wifehood. The wife is introduced as “it,” which implies that wives, as objects, do not have a sense of identity independent of their husbands, whereas men are addressed as “you,” contrasting with the wives’ lack of identity as an objectified “it.” Only once does the speaker refer to the wife as “she.” Even then, the speaker draws on traditional gifts at wedding anniversaries to transform the wife into an object: “in twenty-five years she’ll be silver./In fifty, gold./A living doll, everywhere you look” (31-33).
Even as a “she,” the wife is no more than an object that accrues value over time. The use of “living doll” exposes how the poem refuses to provide agency, or even autonomy, to wifehood. “Doll” implies that women are empty-headed, which suggests that wives are not capable of agency because they are objects or “dolls.” The poem’s construction of an objectified wifehood blocks any attempt to celebrate wifehood. According to the poem, wives are empty-headed objects passed between men in the marriage market.

“The Applicant” constructs men as consumers and women as purchased objects in order to literally create the marriage market. The addressed “you” in the first two stanzas is the young buyer (young as signified by “My boy”) who comes to capitalist, patriarchal merchants who regulate access to power and who sell objectified women. They first validate the buyer’s ability to become “our sort of person,” evoking the image of powerful, unified patriarchy that monitors what kinds of bodies can enter “normal” society. After the buyer is deemed “whole enough” and allowed into the patriarchal community, he receives a wife who is not “she” or “her,” rather an “it.” The poem effectively de-romanticizes marriage by parodying the popular idea of a “match made in heaven,” and offering in its place the match made in commodity hell. Plath often wrote about her “match” with Hughes at the start of their marriage as if it were such a heavenly match. Writing in a confessional mode, her dark parody of marriage in “The Applicant” was partly inspired by her own self-loathing and fear that her marriage had destroyed her ability to write, and partly by the social conventions of the time that she absorbed and subsequently grew to hate and blame as her constraints.

“A Kill” hints that Hughes noted Plath’s intent to de-romanticize “milestones” of adulthood, like wifehood, by using a similar pattern to deconstruct the importance of childbirth.
“A Kill,” like the “The Applicant,” starts with a description of a body that makes it seem like Frankenstein’s monster:

- Flogged lame with legs
- Shot through the head with balled brains
- Shot blind with eyes
- Nailed down his ribs
- Strangled just short of his last grasp
- By his own windpipe
- Clubbed unconscious by his own heart (1-7)

Here, the protagonist violently breaks apart his own body. It is not merely separated, but “flogged,” “shot,” “nailed,” “strangled,” and “clubbed”; the effect pushes the Frankenstein’s monster impression in the “The Applicant” a step further. Both poems critically address the ability of the body, but “A Kill” violently asserts that the body betrays itself. From these first lines the body is clearly masculine. As such, “A Kill” responds to “The Applicant.” Plath’s poem had suggested only women’s bodies are distanced from wholeness. “A Kill” moves to include all bodies, regardless of gender, under the distancing effects of violence.

The violence escalates in the poem and culminates in a “bowel-emptying cry,” which leaves the protagonist weakened (11-13). Just before the hero collapses into darkness, the speaker notes, “He managed to hear, faint and far—‘It’s a boy!’” (15). Including the “it’s a boy!” exclamation reveals the intent of the poem: to de-romanticize birth. Before such an exclamation, the hero’s cry had a vague meaning, seemingly only to escalate the violence. However, “It’s a boy” recalls the celebration at birth. In popular imagination, birth is marked by celebratory announcements proclaiming the gender of the baby. “It’s a boy!” suggests such an image. The cry of the protagonist, then, is the wailing of the baby in the hospital room. The reader cannot escape how the poem juxtaposes birth and violence. Birth is no longer a celebration; rather it is
the point where a child violently enters the world and feels betrayed because the child has left the comfort and security of the womb.

“A Kill” ultimately de-romanticizes birth with its final image. After the “it’s a boy!” celebration, the speaker says, “Then everything went black” (16). There is no celebration; in fact, the movement to “black” suggests death. The poem suggests that proclaiming “It’s a boy!” has killed the protagonist as opposed to heralded him to life. This juxtaposition further conflates death and birth, making it almost impossible to distinguish the two. Plath also notably fused death and birth in her poetry, and Hughes’s use of this technique in “A Kill” indicates that he found inspiration in Plath’s work.

Plath and Hughes’s continuing effort to critique marriage and birth as traditional “markers” of adulthood unifies “The Applicant” and “A Kill.” Both poems successfully expose a clinical/Darwinian underpinning of adulthood events: the commodified “marriage market” and the violent reality of birth. The poems also connect to each other because both wifehood and birth are traditionally understood as part of feminine “experience.” However, both poems also subtly include a critique of masculinity. While “The Applicant” critically evaluates the commodifying effects of the marriage market on women’s bodies, it also provides a subtle critique of masculine norms that devalue men *before* they enter the marriage market. “A Kill” recognizes this criticism in “The Applicant” work and pushes the critique of masculinity violently forward by depicting the betrayal of the male body at birth by the effeminizing womb that destroys masculinity. Thus “A Kill” requires “The Applicant” in a way that draws the two poems together into a unified common text.
The Mother and Me: call and response from “Medusa” to “Crow and Mama”

Several poems in *Ariel* and *Crow* “call and respond” to each other. These conversational poems are distinguished from simple revisions or continuing poetic narratives because they do not seek to re-write each other or apply the same narrative to a different subject; rather, they expose a dynamic conversation between poets and across time. *Ariel*’s “Medusa” and *Crow*’s “Crow and Mama” participate in this complex textual relationship and focus their conversation on the ability of the self to completely separate from the mother. “Medusa” performs an exorcism on the restrictions of motherhood, drawing heavily on the biographical relationship between Plath and her own mother. In “Crow and Mama,” the protagonist violently attempts to separate himself from the mother; however, he ultimately realizes that he can never fully disconnect himself from her influence. “Crow and Mama” borrows several images from “Medusa,” notably from its Virgin Mary iconography. However, it does not simply revise the exorcism performed in “Medusa” or attempt to exorcise the father. Rather, “Crow and Mama” attempts a similar exorcism, but focuses on its failure. Hughes’s shift in focus seems more than simple revision because it “responds” to a “call” made in “Medusa” to cut the mother away from the child.

“Medusa” exposes the violently constraining influence of the mother and draws on Plath’s own experience to critique motherhood. The speaker asks, “Did I escape, I wonder?/My mind winds to you/Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,/Keeping itself, it seems, in state of miraculous repair” (11-15). “Umbilicus” clearly suggests a connection to the mother (as a child is connected to his/her mother through an umbilical chord). Because it maintains a “state of miraculous repair,” the umbilical chord has never been successfully severed. The speaker describes the umbilicus as an “Atlantic cable,” which alludes to Plath’s relationship with her
mother that stretched across the Atlantic Ocean while she lived in England and her mother
remained in Massachusetts. It seems the self can never separate from the influence of the mother
since previous attempts to sever connections have been futile:

I didn’t call you.
I didn’t call you at all.

Nevertheless, nevertheless.
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta
Paralyzing the kicking lovers.
Cobra light
Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless (23-30)

The speaker has tried to push her mother out of her psyche by not calling her, but this action has
failed. She cannot escape the influence of the mother, which the speaker metaphorically figures
as a kind of bloody mythological monster emerging from the ocean, like the eponymous
“medusa.” The terrifying mother violently controls her child’s sexuality by “paralyzing the
kicking lovers.” The speaker links herself to blood-filled flowers that are strangled and die. The
mother, according to “Medusa,” is a destroyer rather than a provider.

In spite of previously failed attempts, the speaker ultimately exorcises the mother’s
influence. Using Christian-informed language, the speaker boldly asks “Who do you think you
are?/A communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?” (32-33). Here, the speaker critically questions the
identity of the mother, ironically invoking holy images to mock the mother—not as the sanctified
“Virgin Mary,” but as the comical “Blubbery Mary.” The speaker denies the mother’s power by
saying, “I shall take no bite of your body,” and ultimately concludes “Off, off eely
tentacle!/There is nothing between us” (34, 40-1). The speaker effectively reduces the influence
of the mother into an identifiable object (the communion wafer) that she can deny. From that
point on she can brush away the mother’s influence (the “eely tentacle”) and powerfully
exorcises her influence.

“Medusa” also obliquely reveals Plath’s dissatisfaction with her own role as a mother. In
it, Plath performs a parallel self-analysis to accompany the exorcism of her mother, Aurelia. The
speaker says, “I shall take no bite of your body, /Bottle in which I live, /Ghastly Vatican” (34-
36). The inserted appositive “Bottle in which I live” links the speaker to the mother’s “body” and
the “Ghastly Vatican.” The mother’s body becomes the “Bottle in which I live,” or, more
concretely, is the constricting social role of the mother in which the speaker now lives.
Additionally, she is a part of the “Ghastly Vatican,” which recalls the Catholic Church as it is
theorized to be the “bride” (or “wife”) of Christ. The speaker recognizes that she is a wife,
daughter, and mother; these three lines create a convergent point for all the female roles that the
speaker, as a woman, inhabits (daughter, mother, and wife) and suggest she seeks to escape the
confines of these oppressive roles. The refusal to “take a bite” or participate in these social roles
suggests that the speaker wants to exorcise not only the influence of the mother but also the
influence of the society that has forced her into these constricting roles.

“Crow and Mama” similarly attempts to exorcise the mother by borrowing images from
“Medusa.” The poem begins: “When Crow cried his mother’s ear/Scorched to a stump./When he
laughed she wept/Blood her breasts her palms her brow all wept blood” (1-4). While the
protagonist seems to harm his mother accidentally, he is a distinct entity separate from the
mother. All of his actions, while unintentionally violent, are attempts to express the self as
separate from the mother. Curiously, as the protagonist harms the mother she weeps blood,
evoking the images of Christian “miracles” that occur when statues of the Virgin Mary begin to
weep blood as a sign of the presence of God. The use of such specific Christian imagery recalls
the imagery used in “Medusa” of the “bleeding palms” image (4) and the “Red stigmata at the very centre” of the mother-monster (9). These specific citations of “Medusa” that appear in “Crow and Mama” draw the two poems together into a common, Christian-informed discourse.

Though the protagonist in “Crow and Mama” appears to separate himself from the mother he inevitably fails, which suggests that it is impossible to ever successfully exorcise the influence of the mother. After escalating violence, Crow “jumped in a rocket and its trajectory/Drilled clean through her heart he kept on/And it was cosy in the rocket” (15-17). Drawing on a Freudian framework, the “rocket” image recalls the phallus, and Crow’s “jumping into” the rocket suggests that he uses specifically masculine sexual power to separate himself from the mother as the rocket “drilled clean through her heart,” effectively killing her. Also, the speaker notes that it was “cosy” in the rocket, implying that the rocket is a natural form of power that Crow as a male can use against females. The rocket image also recalls the arrow in “Ariel,” but here Hughes misprises the direction of his weapon. Whereas Plath’s directs her arrow at the sun—the source of masculine inspiration—Hughes aims his rocket at the moon—the source of feminine power. However, as Crow reaches his destination, the moon, he “crawled out/ Under his mother’s buttocks” (24-25). Here, the moon, a symbol of feminine power, stops the speaker Crow’s phallic power and he realizes that he has not escaped the control of the mother at all. In fact, he never left her. The mother retains her control (or, at the very least, her presence) over the protagonist. Try as he might, he always finds that the mother is in a state of “miraculous repair,” as in “Medusa.”

While “Medusa” can be seen as Plath’s oblique confession that she wished to be free from her mother and her own constricting motherhood, “Crow and Mama” reads as Hughes’s

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19 Here, the use of “moon” indicates the influence of Graves’ The White Goddess, which links the moon to feminine power.
response to Plath’s confession and emphasizes her death’s impact on their children. Hughes may have recognized that Plath felt trapped by her roles as a mother (hence the violence against the mother inflicted by the child in “Crow and Mama”), and he undoubtedly recognized that their children could not escape her influence. They especially could not escape the effects of the popular myth of Plath’s death, which vilified Hughes and held Plath up as a victim of his adulterous behavior. In a 1971 letter, “for…her children she is…an atmosphere we [Hughes and the children] breathe. This something apart from remembrance, it is a world imposed on us by the public consciousness of her and of our inevitable relationship with her” (*Letters* 322). The children would have felt Plath lingering over them as they continued through life, much like Crow’s inability to escape the influence of the mother. In her forward to *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004), Frieda Hughes, Plath’s daughter, confirmed her mother’s spirit in her life: “All the time, he [Hughes] kept alive the memory of the mother who had left me, so I felt as if she were watching over me, a constant presence in my life” (xviii).

The role of the mother troubles both poems, each using similar imagery to describe her. Though “Medusa” provided “Crow and Mama” with its imagery, Hughes was not compelled to revise the poem and assert a completely antithetical response. “Crow and Mama” engages with “Medusa,” but does not attempt to rewrite it. Their “call and response” forms a common text that transcends time and crystallizes as a dynamic conversation. Both poems, in a broader sense, confront the issue of “influence.” While “Medusa” appears to successfully exorcise maternal influence, it paradoxically requires that influence in order write. Without a “target” for its exorcism, “Medusa” would be an empty poem. “Crow and Mama” takes a more fatalistic approach, and acknowledges that influence is inevitable. This conversation centering on “influence” provocatively suggests that Plath and Hughes had more at stake in these poems than
simply a discussion about mothers. These poems indicate their inability to completely separate themselves from each other and from their roles as parents. The two poets obviously needed the “family romance” to write their agonized poems.
Conclusion: *Birthday Letters*—the final word?

In a letter to the judges of the Forward Poetry Prize, Hughes described the creative process that produced *Birthday Letters* (1998), his last published collection before his death: “I try to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife […] thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself” (Letter 1998). Throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes directs questions at Plath, and these questions became the inspiration for his poems.\(^{20}\) Plath is the indirect source of Hughes’s inspiration, his oblique muse. Of course, Plath never responds, which could imply that Hughes sought the “final word” by publishing *Birthday Letters*. However, in view of Hughes’s attempts to “contact” Plath rather than speak for her, it would be reductive and unfair to construct Hughes as merely an arm of aggressive patriarchy and Plath as its victim. As a collection, *Birthday Letters* continues a textual conversation that began early in their careers, and several of the poems capture various facets of Plath and Hughes’s complex relationship. “The Blackbird,” a tightly constructed poem near the end of the collection, surpasses the others in its succinct ability to capture the paradoxical dynamic between Plath and Hughes.

The title “The Blackbird” contains multi-layered allusions to Plath and Hughes. First, it recalls the black bird that struts through Hughes’s *Crow* the book that addresses Plath’s suicide. In effect, the title collapses the separate identities of Plath and Hughes into a single signifier—the blackbird. As a signifier, the blackbird identifies both Plath and Hughes as poets because of the bird’s symbolic connection to “singing,” i.e. poetry. Additionally, because the signifier is a blackbird it recalls the postwar temperament by evoking death. Though blackbirds are a species of birds distinct from crows and ravens, their black color evokes carrion birds that eat corpses and, as symbols, represent bad omens, death and destruction.

\(^{20}\) Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* recalls American poet James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1983). Merrill used an ouija board to contact the spirits of deceased poets and then impersonated their voices. Hughes, however, misprises Merrill’s process in *Birthday Letters*; rather than impersonate Plath, he asks her questions.
The first image of the poem challenges a clear-cut analysis of Plath and Hughes as oppositional. The speaker says, “You were the jailer of your murderer—/Which imprisoned you./And since I was your nurse and your protector/Your sentence was mine too” (1-4). The “you” that Hughes addresses is Plath. The use of prison-focused diction suggests that Plath and Hughes were both “locked” in their relationship, and neither controls the imprisonment. Paradoxically, Plath is jailer and prisoner, as Hughes is both murderer and protector. The juxtaposition of these roles ironically exposes the inability to assign a clear-cut role to either Plath or Hughes. Hughes thus deconstructs a hierarchal relationship so that both poets are victims who nevertheless retained the power to act and write.

The subsequent images elaborate on Plath and Hughes’s shifting power dynamic. At first, Hughes seems to control Plath: “You played at feeling safe. As I fed you/You ate and drank and swallowed/Sliding me sleepy looks, like a suckling babe,/From under your eyelids” (5-8). Hughes constructs a power structure in which he, as a fatherly caretaker, controls Plath, a “suckling babe.” Bloom’s theories regarding a poet’s “Second Birth” help read Hughes’s feeding of Plath as his poetic influence over her. His influence here “feeds” her and helps her grow as a poet. Hughes appears to dominate Plath in these lines, yet she finds a way to subvert his control. First, Plath “played” at feeling safe; she feigned her subordination to Hughes. Hughes implies that underneath Plath’s infant façade, she maintained her rebellious power. In the next stanza, Hughes confirms Plath’s agency: “You fed your prisoner’s rage, in the dungeon,/Through the keyhole—/Then, in a single, stung bound, came back up/The coiled, unlit stairwell” (9-12). In this stanza, Plath asserts her control over Hughes and inverts the previous power structure. She now feeds him, while he remains imprisoned. The stair image recalls the “stairway” to the afterlife. Hughes conflates her father’s work with bees and Plath’s suicide to characterize her
ascent into the afterlife as “a single, stung bound.” The evocation of bees places blame on Plath’s father for Plath’s suicide, which was a single, energetic move into the afterlife.

The poem also questions authorial control, hesitating to identify either Hughes or Plath as the stronger poet. The speaker says, “The lawn lay like the pristine waiting page/Of a prison report./ Who would write upon it/ I never gave a thought” (17-20). The “lawn” represents the larger world of Hughes and Plath, which he compares to a “prison report.” Both poets are, at this point, prisoners. So, the speaker questions who can assert the most strength to write on the report, which would thus define Plath and Hughes’s world. However, because both poets are imprisoned, the speaker cannot directly identify the writer. Their world remains clouded in ambiguity.

The final stanza of the poem completes the poem’s project of resisting a construction of Plath and Hughes as oppositional or hierarchal. The speaker says, “A dumb creature, looping at the furnace door/On its demon’s prong,/ Was a pen already writing,/Wrong is right, right wrong” (21-24). The opening lines of the stanza allude to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” which focuses on a bit of soot fluttering at the grate of a dim furnace. Coleridge’s poem asserts that inspiration possesses a poet sporadically but powerfully, which recalls the possession of the muse. The final lines of the poem assert a final inversion that deconstructs moral absolutes. According to the poem, the categories “right” and “wrong” are useless because they are easily inverted in language. Thus, in consideration of the poem’s larger goal to deconstruct the oppositional relationship between Plath and Hughes, neither appears completely “right” or completely “wrong.” Their actions are subject to interpretation, yet they are more complicated than can be understood by framing either as the victim or the aggressor. They are better understood as, paradoxically, victims and aggressors, destructive and creative, as their
influence and control over each other continuously shifted and they found poetic strength in their unity.

“The Blackbird” and *Birthday Letters* as a collection consider Plath and Hughes through a framework that resists fixing either one as simply a victim or an agent. Instead, both illustrate the numerous ways in which Plath and Hughes were both agents and simultaneously victims. As Plath’s muse, Hughes inflicted her “creative wound,” but she gushed *Ariel* from this blood jet. For Hughes, Plath lingered in his awareness like a wound that refused to heal; yet he continuously released his poetry through that wound. In their texts, they were mirrors—reflecting and revising each other’s wounds. They great closer together in such a mirror—“doubles” of a single, wounded consciousness that created the ultimate symbol of their union: a common text.
Works Cited

*Primary Texts*


*Letters and Journals*


*Secondary Sources*


Suggested Reading

Supplementary Readings: Ted Hughes, *Crow*, and *Birthday Letters*


Supplementary Readings: Sylvia Plath and *Ariel*


Supplementary Readings: Comparative Studies of Plath and Hughes


Supplemental Readings: Theories of Influence


Appendix One: Selected Poems Used in Paper

Ariel

“The Applicant”

“Lady Lazarus”

“Ariel”

“Medusa”

“Daddy”

Birthday Letters

“The Blackbird”

Crow

“A Kill”

“Crow and Mama”

“Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door”

“Crow Tries the Media”

“Dawn’s Rose”

“Song for a Phallus”

The Hawk in the Rain

“Horses”