

## **“LOVERS OF UNREASON: WHY TED HUGHES-SYLVIA PLATH RELATIONSHIP DID NOT WORK OUT?”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath are regarded as the most famed literary couple of modern times. Any reading or understanding of the poems of either of the writers would not be complete if we do not have any knowledge of their turbulent relationship that ended with the tragedy of Sylvia's suicide. Both iconic poets in their own, it is very unfortunate that people remember them more for their ill-fated relationship than their poetic gifts, especially in the case of Sylvia Plath. Saying all that we must take for granted that such emphasis to personal affairs is a necessity. A look into the history of their relationship will help us in better understanding of their poems since both Sylvia and Hughes gave much emphasis on the subjectivity of literary art. Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes were not made for each other, still, they committed themselves to the relationship and thus they brought their own downfall. So, it could be said that their relationship was vitiated ab initio, i.e., right from the very beginning and both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were fatalistic in their attitude; they were like the moths that fly towards the fire. Though Ted Hughes knew the escape route, Sylvia Plath did know how to come out of it. Notwithstanding this difference between them, it could safely be said that both were responsible to some extent for their own fate. They were illogical, impulsive and driven by blind Eros.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Love, Unreasonable, Psychic, Relationship*

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### **Article History**

**Received: 30 May 2018 | Revised: 09 Jun 2018 | Accepted: 18 Jun 2018**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The tragic and sensational death of Sylvia Plath, her successful suicide attempt by putting her head in the oven created a stir in the literary circle during that period. In the United States as well as in the United Kingdom there were strong reactions against Ted Hughes. People blamed him for the sad end of Sylvia. Questions arose in the minds of the people as to what went wrong. A probe reveals that Ted Hughes-Sylvia Plath did not work out because of numerous reasons.

Seamus Heaney, a close friend of Ted Hughes, in his lecture on Ted Hughes titled "Suffering and Decision" observed how the personal life and poetry were inseparable from each other. Hughes himself testified to the truthfulness of this statement when he wrote in his poem "Epiphany", "But I failed. Our marriage had failed". The finality of the statement was very deciding and pointed to the fact that poetry was for Hughes very close to his personal experience.

But what Ted Hughes did not mention is that he could not remain faithful to Sylvia. Tall, handsome, Hulk-like as

he was, Ted Hughes had roving eyes and during his youth, he had a series of romantic and sexual escapades. He was linked to Edna Wholey, Liz, Shirley, Brenda and later famously to Cassia. Though Ted was dutiful towards Sylvia on most occasions, he ultimately proved unfaithful to her. In a poem titled "The Rabbit Catcher," Sylvia expressed that their marriage once sacred had now become a trap:

**And we, too, had a relationship-  
Tight wires between us,  
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring  
Sliding shut on some quick thing,  
The constriction killing me also.**

**(Hughes. "Collected Poems". 123)**

Sylvia also looked for a meaningful relationship with other men when Ted did not return to her and ultimately committed suicide, putting the onus of the failed relationship with Ted Hughes.

In comparison with the other girls of the Fifties, Sylvia was sexually precocious and unusually adventurous. Sylvia Plath had a history of creating rivalry among men. During her final undergraduate years at Smith College, he had affairs with a gentle boy named Gordon Lameyer and a bohemian Yale student called Richard Sassoon. Over the summer he had a brief but blazing sexually liaison with Peter Davison, an editor of New York working in Boston. She flirted with many men. Rejected by Sassoon after a huge row, she looked forward to someone who was very passionate as well as docile. Falling in love was for Sylvia a matter of place and placing oneself and it was at the launch party of "Saint Botolph's Review" that Sylvia met Ted Hughes and fell for him. But post marriage, Sylvia was committed to Hughes, her husband. After both of them started living separately she looked for a new man in her life. Richard Murphy having failed her, she kept her hope on A. Alvarez. But he did not respond to her interest in him.

Both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were highly impulsive and passionate lovers. Sylvia wooed many men, but it was the charismatic Hughes, big, violent and Hulk-like who stole her heart. In the launch party of "Saint Botolph's Review" Sylvia's found him to be 'as big as his poem'. Both his spoken and written words were 'strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders'. Sylvia's knee went 'jelly weak' and the room of the party hung in her eyes like 'death's door camera –shot'. She made love with Hughes violently. Hughes, who believed in astrology had cast the night's horoscope and it predicted 'disastrous expense'. That night was disastrous both for Ted and Sylvia. Ted later wrote:

**First sight. First snapshot isolated  
Unalterable, stilled in the camera's glare  
Taller than ever you were again. Swaying so slender  
It seemed your long, perfect, America legs  
Simply went on up.**

**(Hughes. "Collected Poems" 123)**

The camera is a key metaphor here as is in many poems of Ted Hughes of Sylvia Plath. The first snapshot reveals his impulsiveness and the confident American glamour of Sylvia. Hughes found the American connection something special. American Sylvia enticed him more than York Edna, Mancunian Liz or Liverpoolian Shirley. Hughes liked the sexually confident, bright-red lipstick American girl that Sylvia had been. For Hughes making love to Plath was a unique experience in that she embodied the energy and gusto of Shakespeare's 'brave new world'. The beautiful 'Americans had taken the possessions of him' (Plath. "The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath". 1055-1058)

It would not be a misnomer if we call the choices of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath 'fatalistic'. Both of them knew that temperamentally they were different, yet both committed themselves to the relationship. Once Sylvia wrote in a poem titled "Pursuit" that the more intensely one loved, the more one burned and consumed oneself:

**There is a panther stalks me down:  
One day I'll have my death of him  
His greed has set the woods aflame,  
He prowls more loudly than these sun.**

(Plath. "Collected Poems". 22)

Here Plath likens Ted with a panther, blind animal force and a sexual marauder; Sylvia willing her death of him. Ted also knew by intuition during the early period of their relationship that she is very passionate and capable of emotional outbursts. Sylvia, on the other hand, knew that she makes love to a seducer. Still, she liked to suffer and bleed. She loved his rich voice, incredible tenderness and violence, virile body. She loved her, but she was also scared of him:

**Consider yourself lucky to have been stabbed by him; never  
Complain or bitter or ask for more than normal humans  
Consideration as an integrate being. Let him go.  
Have the guts. Make him happy: cook, play, read.....keep other  
Cups and flagons full- never accuse or nag let him run, reap, rip and  
Glory in the temporary sun of his ruthless force.**

(Plath. "Collected Poems". 66)

Ted tried to bring reconciliation before Sylvia committed suicide, but Sylvia did not give him the chance. The creative spirit of Sylvia could be noticed in such poems as "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy" etc. -poems which were composed after both of them started living separately. Sylvia articulated her smoldering rage against his father, Ted as well as her mother Aurelia. In "Medusa" it was her mother, Aurelia Plath, who is arraigned. Love remained a distant ideal for Sylvia. Sylvia could not find out the love and care that she longed for, though her mother tried her best to help her out. A person who can write such stuff as:

**Dying  
Is an art, like everything else,**

**I do it exceptionally well.**

**I do it so it feels like hell.**

**I do it so it feels real.**

**I guess you could say I'be a call**

**(Plath. "Collected Poems".45)**

The poem also reflects her scorn for her father and her husband: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air." ("Lady Lazarus") Such kinds of feelings well out only from a deeply wounded soul.

Many critics likened Ted Hughes- Sylvia relationship to Catherine-Heath cliff relationship of Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights". Both Ted Hughes and Heath cliff lived with the haunting memories of their lady loves. But there are also differences. Whereas Ted Hughes deserted Sylvia to live a life of his own, it was Catherine who dumped Heath cliff at the beginning. Love for Catherine and Heath cliff was blind and elemental. For Ted and Sylvia love was a choice. Falling for someone was for Sylvia a matter of choice. It was calculated and premeditated. The men for whom she fell for had something distinct about them. She fell for Sassoon because he was collaterally descended from the war poet Siegfried Sassoon. Davison was a publisher and Ted was a great British poet.

Ted too quite often reflected upon the road not taken. He proposed his lover Shirley to flee with him and get married and Shirley refused the proposal. Later in his life Ted wrote that Shirley was too young to "Recognize one of those offers / Life makes only once". (Untitled Insertion to *Birth Day Letters*)

There is in Sylvia something preordained, genetically inbuilt depressive syndromes that acted against the Ted - Sylvia relationship. Ted was unfaithful, still it could be said that she did not take proper care of their relationship. With regard to Assia, she proved too curious. She started suspecting him even before the actual relationship started.

As things unfolded it became clear that Ted and Sylvia were not made for each other. They had different likes and dislikes and the thing that was common was poetry. Ted was very sympathetic towards the flora and fauna. Sylvia did not care much. Once on the evening of Independence Day Ted brought home an injured bird. After a weak when it became clear that the bird would not revive, Sylvia gassed it to death. The bird was removed prematurely by Ted and it lay on his palm "composed, perfect and beautiful in death". (Plath. 391). Ted's success as a poet had a lot to do with the marriage. Ted craved for more and more free space and Sylvia went on to become more and more possessive about Ted. Ted's relationships with many girls complicated the matter for Sylvia. Sylvia's poetic muse came to her home when Ted left. But writing and looking after the children all alone was not easy for her. As is evident from her letters to her mother, she had an obsessive drive to accomplish everything at the same time.

That Sylvia was emotionally volatile and prone to self-pity is revealed in her more than one unsuccessful suicide attempt. Sylvia's thoughts on Ted kept changing. In January 1961 both Ted and Sylvia recorded a joint interview for BBC radio and Sylvia said "I'd never be writing as I am and as much as I am without Ted's understanding and cooperation." (Plath.7th July, 1974) Long after Sylvia's death Ted Hughes admitted to American editor Francis McCullough that sometimes when Sylvia was in blind rage, he could not help slapping her. Once when she got a black eye she told to the doctor that "Ted beat her regularly." (Letter to Francis McCullough) On another occasion Sylvia suggested her mother that Ted had been good to him. Even after that they started living separately. Though Ted was having an affair with Assia, she

did not give up his hope of reconciliation with Sylvia. The poem "Soho Square", which was at first included in "Birthday Letters", but later omitted, Ted and Sylvia had a walk and talked a lot. Sylvia cried a lot like a child and accused Ted of having affairs with Assia and Dido Merwin. Ted denied and tried to control her vainly. Ted sought reconciliation and invited Sylvia to stay the night in the flat with Dido Merwin's mother. Sylvia accepted the proposal, but the overwhelming grief and the flood of emotions could not be controlled. They had a fierce quarrel. Ted shouted: "A boulder, insensate, irrelevant, / While that tidal wave, that eruption / From your childhood, swamped and buried our world"(Hughes.01). Emotionally, poetically it was a climax and Ted had opportunity to restart, but he did not take it.

The classic defense that most men take to justify an extra-marital relationship, is that there had been cracks in their marriage since a long period. Ted, writing to Gerald accepted that fame had changed his life and he often desired to escape from the known circles. In a letter to Olwyn Hughes indicated that the relationship started disintegrating sometime in "April or so" and both "decided to part ways, in spite of obstacles" (Plath. "The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath". 87). The reason as Hughes, himself wrote in a letter to Olwyn was his intimacy with Assia. Sylvia left for Cornwall to stay with the Kanes on 16th October, 1962 (Plath. "The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath". 55). But that was the tip of the iceberg. The true reason was not that. It was perhaps the ever-growing reputation of Ted Hughes that worked against the marriage. Ted was craving for more freedom and wishing to come out of the marriage. This made Ted nonchalant and wanted to be 'without the terrible censorship of somebody like Sylvia' (Plath. "The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath". 20). That the marriage had been stifled for the creativity of both Ted and Sylvia was recognized by the fact that Ted did not write anything inspiring from 1966 to 1968, a period when both of them were experiencing low and Sylvia wrote finest of her poems after he started living separately. The separation had liberated Sylvia's creativity, but also made her lose control over her own life. For Ted it had thawed effect at the beginning and a lasting effect of mellowed maturity came later.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were two people united by poetry and divided by the lack of commitment of the former and volcanic disruptive energy of the latter. Deep psychic abnormalities of Sylvia Plath and the consuming animal's zest of Ted Hughes were propositions that did not allow them to bloom as an ideal couple. Saying that it has to be accepted that the severance worked wonders to Sylvia and she went on to become a great woman poet, probably the greatest woman poet after Emily Dickinson.

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