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Poetry: Plath became feminist icon

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standing with critics worse. He was supposedly giving Plath to the world, but her poetry was heavily edited, not to mention the fact that Plath's "crazy-suicidal" identity had solidified under his editing guise.

"The whole 'giving Plath to the world' seemed to be manipulated and deceptive. He took out nearly a dozen poems and added a dozen," Ford said. "Her book, she always said, began with the word 'love' and ended with the word 'spring,' and it was a narrative of the dogmatic soul ending with the resurrection, the promise of spring.

"He made a new narrative ... so that the book he published doesn't bear enough relation to Plath's 'Ariel' to warrant our attention anymore except as an oddity and aberration of editing."

Hughes' control over Plath's literary work has caused feminist scholars to portray her as an icon. Plath's role is complicated: Her work and editing are a prime example of how women have been suppressed in art and writing; however, she doesn't fit the mold of the "traditional" feminist icon. Her ambitions as a writer and as a wife conflicted.

"We see in her struggles a kind of 1950s femininity come up against the brick wall of how can a woman be a genius and a real woman, too," Ford said. "Plath is sort of the culmination of that vein of women's writing where it seems that these are mutually exclusive pursuits ... she simply wanted to be

Miss America and a Nobel Prize-winning poet at the same time."

Because many feminist readers and critics have tried to make her into an icon, they blame Hughes for her death. However, they should be more concerned with his interest in cashing in on his dead wife's name.

Although he claims "Birthday Letters" is an outpouring of years of torment, he is still refuses to grant interviews. Yet friends, editors and critics are applauding the book for its emotional vulnerability and sense of impending disaster. There is definitely an aspect of disaster: Hughes' editing.

No matter what Hughes plans to do in the future, the

fact remains that he altered Plath's poetic art and reputation forever. And contrary to Hughes' supporters, this book in no way "unmasks" their relationship.

Major Jackson, a graduate student in English, sees the book as damage control. "England has not produced a significant poet since [W.H.] Auden, save for [Philip] Larkin," he said. "So the publication of 'Letters' is a means of inserting a mediocre English poet into the consciousness of the world of poetry."

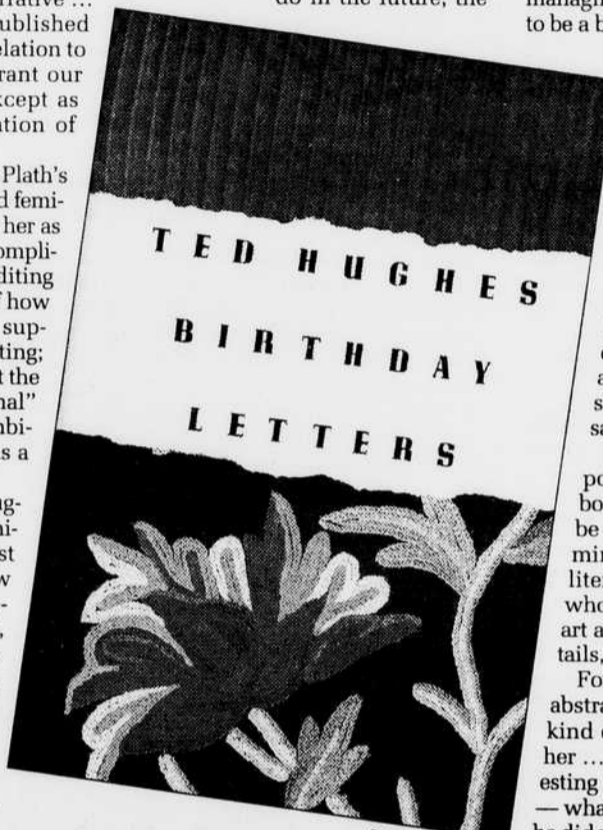
Ford is also skeptical about his motivations. "If we're supposed to believe that this is not self-interest, that this is not the 'old' Hughes managing everything, there ought to be a book about his second wife

who killed herself and their daughter in the same manner." In an eerie imitation of Plath, his second wife, Assia, and their daughter, Shura, died after putting their heads together in the oven.

"I refuse to be drawn into reading ['Birthday Letters'] as a kind of psychic healing for Hughes or as a recognition that we should forgive him," Ford said.

So how are readers supposed to be affected by this book? Is there really going to be a transformation in the minds of "the consumers of literature and poetry, those who have a true interest in the art and not the sensational details," Jackson asked.

Ford sums it up best: "In the abstract you might think he's kind of a creep for abandoning her ... none of that is very interesting finally. What is interesting — what's unforgivable — is what he did with the literary remains."



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