

# The Other



## SUMMARY

The speaker, addressing their listener directly throughout as "you," says that another woman had more than you thought she needed, so you happily helped yourself to a little of all that was hers (the speaker never mentions what, exactly, is being taken here, but readers can guess they're talking about joy, success, love, etc.). You didn't have a single thing that she did, so you took some of whatever she had. You didn't take much, at least in the beginning.

Yet this other woman still had so much that it made you all the more aware of how much you still didn't have. Evoking Aristotle's famous declaration that nature hates a vacuum, you took from this woman until you were full, justifying that doing so was only natural. She was so fortunate that you felt unfortunate in comparison, and you thus decided to correct the imbalance between the two of you. Some of what she had was all yours now, which seemed like the way it should be. Even so, her drive to succeed upset you, making you feel as useless and overshadowed as words on a page that had been crossed out and then carelessly thrown in the trash. The gods, you believed, needed someone to step in and take this woman down a few pegs. Despising her made you feel a little less anxious.

You gathered up all the things she'd won, and the joy these things brought her, and you considered this fair repayment for the fact that you'd lost. This resulted in her having nothing left. Her very life itself got tangled up in the pile of things you grabbed, leaving her with nothing at all. By the time you realized what you'd done, there was nothing you could do to stop it. The woman had died, but that didn't change anything. You finally had everything that had once been hers, but now you were the one who had more than you needed. You were the only person who could see her happily taking back what you stole from her. She didn't take much, at least in the beginning.

woman until eventually, *she* was the one left with nothing—literally; she died, and her haunting presence chipped away at your stolen abundance.

The poem is based on Hughes's relationship with Assia Wevill, the woman for whom he left his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath; the "you" is generally interpreted as Wevill and the "her" as Plath (who died by suicide not long after Hughes moved out of their shared home). That said, it's possible to read any number of relationships into the poem's dynamic, and "The Other" ultimately shows how treating life as a kind of zero-sum game, wherein another's happiness means the loss of your own, leads only to misery.

The speaker begins the poem by describing the perceived imbalance between "you" and a second, "Other" woman. You felt entitled to "some / Of everything" the woman had, the speaker says, because she had "too much." You justified your theft by presenting it as "redressing," or righting, "an imbalance."

"At first," the speaker says, you took "just a little" from this woman. But even when you had more than the "nothing" you had to begin with, you still felt a "vacuum" (or void) when confronted with this woman's abundance. She "still had so much," the speaker says, adding that "Her great lucky made you feel unlucky." You essentially viewed your relationship with this woman as a competition: whenever she won, you lost—and you kept taking from her because you felt owed "compensation."

Yet despite helping yourself to "Everything she had won"—her "luck," "ambition," and "happiness"—you continued to resent this woman for her accomplishments. You sought to "correct" her "hubris" (or pride) with "a little hatred," apparently unable to find satisfaction or peace so long as this woman had anything at all.

Your envy grew so ravenous that it eventually left the woman with "absolutely nothing," her "life" itself "Trapped in the heap" (or pile) of things that you took from her. And by the time you realized the consequences of your actions, the speaker says, it was "Too late." The other woman was dead, and the tables had reversed: *you* were the one with "too much" and the other woman began to take something back (the implication being that her haunting presence made it impossible to enjoy the things you'd stolen).

Hughes is alluding to the fact that Plath became very famous after her death and that her memory haunted Wevill, who also died by suicide six years after Plath did. More broadly, however, the poem paints a disturbing portrait of how destructive envy and entitlement can be, suggesting the danger of constantly measuring your life and happiness against someone else's.



## THEMES



### THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF ENVY AND ENTITLEMENT

"The Other" illustrates the self-destructive potential of unchecked envy, comparison, and entitlement. The speaker tells a story about the relationship between "you" and a woman whose "great luck" you envied. Having "Absolutely nothing" yourself, you felt it "only fair" to take "some. / Of everything she had." Rather than being satisfied, however, this theft (of happiness, good fortune, etc.) only made you all the more aware of your own life's comparative lack. You took and took from this

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-29

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-4**

*She had too ...  
... just a little.*

"The Other" begins with an anonymous speaker addressing a second person directly. This opening is fairly vague: the reader doesn't know who "she" or "you" is nor what their relationship to each other might be (nor what their relationship to the speaker is). There's also no explanation as to what this "she" had "too much" of, which suggests that the exact nature of this "too much" doesn't particularly matter; as the poem goes on, readers will get the sense that the "you" of the poem would never be happy so long as "she" had anything at all.

Listen to how the [sibilance](#) here adds a smooth hush to the opening line, perhaps suggesting the delicateness and stealth with which "you" took "some," smiling all the while:

She had too much so with a smile you took some.

That "smile" might suggest deception—that you pretended to be close to the woman's while stealing from her—or perhaps it simply shows that you were pleased with yourself for this theft.

Line 2 then begins with a preposition, which might make it sound like a continuation of line 1 ("you took some / Of everything she had"). Except, line 1 is firmly [end-stopped](#) with a period. Line 2 is thus really the start of a new clause; it means something more like, "*You had none of the things she had.*"

The line would read more clearly had Hughes written, "Of everything she had, you had absolutely nothing"—but, of course, Hughes didn't write it this way! Instead, he's deliberately toying with syntax here to make the lines of the poem run together, blurring the poetic distance between this other woman and "you."

The [enjambment](#) across lines 2-3 ("you had / Absolutely nothing") adds to the effect, keeping the poem feeling slippery and disjointed. In starting line 3 with the phrase "Absolutely nothing," enjambment also calls attention to the vast chasm between these two people's experiences: whereas "she" had "everything," the person the speaker is addressing had nothing at all.

Notice the [repetition](#) in lines 1-3:

She had too much so with a smile you took some.  
Of everything she had you had  
Absolutely nothing, so you took some.

[Diacope](#) (the repetition of "She had" / "had") adds rhythm to the poem and also feels a little claustrophobic, as though your envy for what the woman ate away at the space between the two of you.

Meanwhile, [epistrophe](#) (the repetition of "you took some" at the ends of lines 1 and 3) suggests that this taking was hardly a one-time thing. The repetition implies a pattern; you took and took from this woman. Indeed, in line 4, the speaker says that "At first," you took "just a little." The qualifier "At first" implies that you would go on to take far *more* than "just a little."

In terms of form, notice how short this first stanza is in comparison to the subsequent two. This gives the poem's opening stanza an introductory feel; the fourth line feels like a springboard into the rest of the poem. The poet's use of [free verse](#) creates a conversational and intimate [tone](#), which is fitting considering the speaker is addressing someone they seem to know an awful lot about.

Finally, a note on the poem's context: given that this poem appears in a collection inspired by Hughes's relationship with the poet Assia Wevill, many readers take "she" as Sylvia Plath, "you" as the Wevill, and the speaker as Hughes himself. In this reading, Wevill is envious of Plath's relationship with Hughes, her poetic skill and ambition, and so forth. While this context helps to ground the poem's ambiguous language, readers should note that it's not strictly necessary to interpret the characters this way (indeed, if one didn't know this context, it might sound like the speaker is talking to *themselves*).

**LINES 5-7**

*Still she had ...  
... for nature's sake.*

Although you took "some" of "everything" this other woman had, it wasn't enough. The woman "Still" had too much, and this made you "feel" your own "vacuum." A "vacuum" is an empty space, so the speaker is saying that this woman's abundance reminded you of how much you still lacked.

Notice the [allusion/idiom](#) in line 6:

Your vacuum, which nature abhorred,

The phrase "nature abhors a vacuum" is attributed to Aristotle, who argued that empty spaces go against the laws of nature—and that nature will therefore quickly fill any empty space with surrounding matter. Nowadays the phrase is sometimes used idiomatically to mean that any absence will soon be filled.

The speaker goes on to say that, due to this truth of "nature," you "took your fill" (or took as much as you wanted) "for nature's sake" (that is, on nature's behalf).

[Polypoton](#) (the [repetition](#) of "nature" / "nature's") suggests that the speaker is being [ironic](#). You weren't acting on behalf of

nature at all, but rather on behalf of your own selfish desires.

### LINES 8-13

*Because her great ...  
... into a basket.*

In line 8, the speaker says that the woman's "great luck made you feel unlucky." [Polyptoton](#) (the [repetition](#) of the root word "luck") highlights the contrast between your emptiness and the woman's abundance. Again, you kept measuring your own life against this woman's—and apparently coming up short.

You thus felt it was "only fair" to correct (or "redress") the balance between you two. The speaker's tone here comes across as mocking and derisive; the speaker thinks little of the assertion that life must always be "fair."

Even when "you had some" for yourself, the speaker continues, you weren't satisfied. On the contrary, however, the woman's "ambition" was still so great that it "Claimed the natural right to screw you up." It sounds like you felt the whole world was out to get you.

Witnessing this woman's drive and talent made you feel "Like a crossed-out page, tossed into a basket." This [simile](#) reveals that you felt inconsequential in comparison to this woman. Despite all you'd taken from her, you still felt like nothing more than some scribbles that were crossed out and then thrown away like trash.

The mention of writing here brings to mind the poem's context: both Assia Wevill (again, usually interpreted as the "you" here) and Sylvia Plath (the other woman) were poets. If readers interpret the poem as being biographical, then Hughes is scathingly implying that Wevill wasn't satisfied at having "taken" Plath's husband; she wanted her talent and success as a writer, too.

### LINES 14-16

*Somebody, on behalf ...  
... steadied the nerves.*

After saying that the woman's "ambition" made you feel as if you still had nothing, the speaker says:

Somebody, on behalf of the gods,  
Had to correct that hubris.

Basically, you felt it was your duty to cut the woman down to size—to humble her.

Again, though, the speaker's tone is mocking and [ironic](#). The dramatic phrase "on behalf of the gods" implies that you were just as arrogant as (if not more arrogant than) this woman. The *real* problem, the poem implies, was your "hubris" in believing it was your divine right to "correct" this woman.

The then speaker says that "A little touch of hatred steadied the nerves." In other words, you found relief from your anxieties

about not being enough, about not being as "luck[y]" or as "ambitio[us]" as this woman, by hating her. Taking from her was a way of making yourself feel more valuable and powerful.

### LINES 17-22

*Everything she had ...  
... She had nothing.*

The speaker says that you also viewed your relationship with this woman as a kind of competition or game—one that you'd "lost." As "compensation," you felt entitled to "Everything she had won"—all the way down to the "happiness" her [metaphorical](#) winnings brought her.

This is a major escalation from the first stanza, where you took "just a little." Having gotten a taste for this woman's life, apparently, you decided to devour her whole; it seemed you would never be satisfied so long as this woman had anything at all. The word "collected" also makes you sound like a cold-hearted debtor or bill collector, as though the theft of joy could be considered mere *reimbursement*. The sharp /c/ sound also chimes with "compensation," this [alliteration](#) adding an icy crispness to the line.

Yet this unchecked envy, the speaker reveals, had major consequences. This woman was left with "absolutely / Nothing," a phrase that deliberately echoes the poem's first stanza:

Of everything she had you had  
Absolutely nothing, so you took some.

This [repetition](#) emphasizes how the roles became reversed: now you were the one with "everything."

In fact, the speaker says that "Even [the woman's] life was / Trapped in the heap" of things that you stole. It isn't yet clear whether the speaker means this literally or metaphorically, but either way, the point is that this person has gone too far.

The emphatic repetition of the word "Nothing" in lines 21 and 22 suggests the speaker's disgust and anger with this turn of events:

Nothing. Even her life was  
Trapped in the heap you took. She had **nothing**.

Notice, too, how lines 18-22 are all [enjambéd](#):

You collected  
As your **compensation**  
For having lost. Which left her **absolutely**  
**Nothing**. Even her life **was**  
Trapped in the heap you took. She had nothing.

This lends the poem a sensation of hectic momentum, which subtly echoes the way that this person's envy and entitlement

grew out of hand. It also adds weight to the [end-stopped](#) "She had nothing" in line 22, emphasizing the finality of her deprivation.

### LINES 23-26

*Too late you ...  
... much too much.*

By the time you'd realized what you'd done, the speaker says, it was "Too late": the woman was already "dead."

The speaker never spells out what happened directly, but this is almost certainly an [allusion](#) to Plath's life: she died by suicide a few months after Hughes left her for Wevill. The poem frames this death as the result of her life being [metaphorically](#) stolen from her (in real life, things were more complicated).

The thudding /d/ [alliteration](#) in "difference" and "dead" in line 24 adds weight to this moment. Adding to the tragedy here is the implication that you hadn't *meant* for the woman to die. You were so caught up in comparing yourself with this woman and trying to take what she had, the poem implies, that you perhaps never really considered what this theft would do to *her*. You hadn't thought of her as a real person, only as a measuring stick for your own worth.

The speaker then says:

Now that you had all she had ever had  
You had much too much.

[Diacope](#) (the [repetition](#) of "had" and "much" in these lines) adds an intense, claustrophobic rhythm to these lines. Everything that you had been so desperately envious of was now yours—but now it was "too much!" Having taken someone's life, you felt guilty and haunted by her memory.

### LINES 27-29

*Only you ...  
... just a little.*

The poem's final lines emphasize your guilt even more directly. But first, notice how there's a vast white space on the page before "Only you" appears in line 27:

- This space might evoke the woman's absence, allowing her death to really sink in.
- This space also draws out the poem's final moments, creating a dramatic pause before the reader finds out what the future held for the person the speaker is addressing.
- Finally, having "Only you" isolated on the far right margin of the page reflects this person's isolation after essentially destroying the woman against whom they measured their entire life.

Because the woman was "dead," this passage implies that it was

her *memory* (and the memory of what "you" did to her) that then "took." The implication is that guilt gradually ate away at you, leaving you unable to enjoy all that you stole. This woman couldn't literally "smile" in death, of course, but the speaker implies that she would have been pleased to know how she held power even from beyond the grave. Despite losing everything, it's almost as though she *still won* in the end.

In the poem's final line, the speaker then repeats the language from the end of the first stanza word-for-word, emphasizing how the roles reversed:

At first, just a little.

This repetition implies that the cycle repeated itself—and that the same fate awaited the person the speaker addresses. The poem thus ends on a deeply [ironic](#) note: in stealing this woman's life, you also stole her tragic fate.

This ending is made more powerful by the poem's context: Wevill died by suicide six years after Plath did, in part because she felt haunted by Plath's presence in her life (she was living with Hughes and mothering his and Plath's children).

Remember, however, that if the "you" of this poem is meant to be Wevill and the "she" is Plath, then the speaker must be Hughes himself—yet the poem conspicuously doesn't implicate the *speaker* in these events at all. In real life, Hughes wasn't exactly a passive observer (i.e., Wevill didn't "take" him from Plath; he left willingly). In remaining invisible in the poem, the speaker lends their re-telling of events an air of objective authority that doesn't necessarily reflect the historical truth of things.

Of course, given that the poem doesn't name names, it isn't necessary to limit its scope to the events that inspired it. Instead, it can be read more generally as a warning against envy and entitlement, which, here, completely destroy both characters' lives.



## POETIC DEVICES

### REPETITION

[Repetition](#) plays an important role in "The Other." On one level, it emphasizes the fact that the person the speaker is addressing is never satisfied; the poem's repetitive *language* reflects this person's repetitive *taking* from the "woman" they so envy.

For example, listen to the [epistrophe](#) and [diacope](#) in lines 1-3:

She had too much so with a smile **you took some**.  
Of everything she **had you had**  
Absolutely nothing, so **you took some**.

Epistrophe (the repetition of "you took some") emphasizes this

continual theft; this isn't something that happened just one time! Rather, they "took some" again and again. The diacope of "had," meanwhile, emphasizes the way that this person keeps comparing themselves to the other woman, measuring whatever *they* "had" against whatever *she* "had."

The [polyptoton](#) in line 8 works similarly, calling attention to the zero-sum relationship between these people. That is, the first person feels like only one of them can have luck, happiness, success, etc. at a time:

Because her great **luck** made you feel **unlucky**

The repetition of the root word "luck" highlights the perceived imbalance between these people.

The speaker also repeats language more broadly across the poem. Most obviously, the first and final stanzas feature similar or outright identical language in spots:

She **had too much** so with a **smile** you **took some**.

[...]

Absolutely **nothing**, so you **took some**.

At **first, just a little**.

[...] Which left her **absolutely**

**Nothing**. Even her life was

Trapped in the heap you **took**. She had **nothing**.

[...]

You **had much too much**.

Only you

Saw her **smile**, as she **took some**.

At **first, just a little**.

The repetition of "had too much," "absolutely nothing," "smile," and "at first, just a little" all reflect the reversal that happens between these two people: the woman who was stolen from in turn becomes the thief (of "happiness," "ambition," "life," etc.).

#### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "She had too much," "smile," "you took some."
- **Line 2:** "she had you had"
- **Line 3:** "Absolutely nothing," "you took some."
- **Line 4:** "At first, just a little."
- **Line 5:** "she had so much"
- **Line 6:** "nature"
- **Line 7:** "nature's"
- **Line 8:** "luck," "unlucky"
- **Line 20:** "absolutely"
- **Line 21:** "Nothing"
- **Line 22:** "nothing"
- **Line 25:** "you," "had," "had," "had"
- **Line 26:** "You had much too much"
- **Line 28:** "smile," "she took some."

- **Line 29:** "At first, just a little."

#### ENJAMBMENT

The poem's many [enjambement](#) lines work alongside [end-stopped](#) lines to control the poem's pace, by turns speeding it up and slowing it down. At times, enjambment also evokes the frantic, relentless nature of the person the speaker address's envy.

For example, the clear enjambment of line 2 ("had / Absolutely nothing") adds a burst of momentum to the poem, pushing the reader over the line break. This evokes the energy and force with which "you took some," and it also calls readers' attention to the phrase "Absolutely nothing" by placing it at the beginning of line 3. Enjambment thus emphasizes both this person's eagerness to take and their sense of lack.

Elsewhere, enjambment draws the poem out, splitting lines up in a way that makes the poem visually longer on the page and evokes the gradual yet steady theft that's happening. Look at lines 18-22, for example. Here, a long string of enjambed lines creates a kind of snowball effect. That is, it's as though the poem is relentless rolling down the page, collecting speed and pieces of this other woman's life as it goes:

You collected

As your **compensation**

For having lost. Which left her **absolutely**

**Nothing**. Even her life was

Trapped in the heap you **took**. She had **nothing**.

All those enjambments make the end-stopped "She had nothing" land with firm finality.

Likewise, the periods at the ends of the subsequent two lines leave no room for argument:

Too late you saw what had happened.

It made no difference that she was dead.

Coming on the heels of so much enjambment, these three end-stopped lines in a row feel all the more emphatic.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "had / Absolutely"
- **Lines 5-6:** "feel / Your"
- **Lines 8-9:** "unlucky / You"
- **Lines 9-10:** "meant / Now"
- **Lines 11-12:** "ambition / Claimed"
- **Lines 12-13:** "up / Like"
- **Lines 18-19:** "collected / As"
- **Lines 19-20:** "compensation / For"
- **Lines 20-21:** "absolutely / Nothing"
- **Lines 21-22:** "was / Trapped"

- **Lines 25-26:** "had / You"
- **Lines 27-28:** "you / Saw"

## SIMILE

The poem uses a [simile](#) in lines 11-13 to illustrate the person the speaker address's feelings of envy and inadequacy. The speaker says:

[...] Still her ambition  
 Claimed the natural right to screw you up  
 Like a crossed-out page, tossed into a basket.

This simile suggests that this person is so envious of the other woman's "ambition" that even after taking their "fill" (or as much as they wanted) from her, they still feel worthless in comparison. The image of a scribbled-out "page" implies that this person feels like a mistake; the image of the paper thrown into the bin suggests they feel like trash. The only way for them to feel like they have something, it seems, is to rid this woman of her aspirations and talent, to bring her down to their level.

The use of a simile is particularly noticeable here because the poem otherwise steers away from [figurative language](#) or much specificity of any kind. These lines are the closest the reader gets to understanding this person's motives (or what the speaker assumes this person's motives are, as this person is not given the opportunity to speak for themselves).

The image of a "crossed-out page" might also be read as a subtle [allusion](#) to the fact that Assia Wevill and Sylvia Plath, the women this poem was written about, were both poets. The poem perhaps hints that Wevill may have been jealous not only of Plath's life with Hughes, but also of her literary talent.

### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "Still her ambition / Claimed the natural right to screw you up / Like a crossed-out page, tossed into a basket."

## IRONY

The speaker's use of verbal [irony](#) adds to the poem's mocking, derisive tone. In lines 5-7, for example, the speaker says:

Still she had so much she made you feel  
 Your vacuum, which nature abhorred,  
 So you took your fill, for nature's sake.

This is an [allusion](#) to the phrase "nature abhors a vacuum," which is attributed to Aristotle and means that nature will always try to fill empty spaces. The speaker is saying that this person justifies their theft through the idea that it goes against the laws of nature for this woman to have so much while they

have so little.

Yet the phrase "for nature's sake" suggests that the speaker is being sarcastic rather than serious; they don't *really* think that this person is acting on behalf of "nature." In reality, they're only acting out of their own selfish desires.

Similarly, in lines 14-15, the speaker says:

Somebody, on behalf of the gods,  
 Had to correct that hubris.

Again, the speaker is being sarcastic; this person is of course not acting "on behalf of the gods," but rather on behalf of their own insecurities and desires. In pretending to have some divine mission, it's really the person the speaker addresses who's displaying hubris here.

There's also some situational [irony](#) in the poem's final moments. The person who starts the poem with "absolutely nothing" ends it with "too much." They've taken everything they wanted, but, ironically, everything they took will prove to be their downfall. The poem's final lines echo its opening stanza, implying that the same fate that befell the woman now awaits the person whom the speaker addresses: the woman will take and take from this person (in the sense that her memory will haunt them) until they, too, are left with nothing.

### Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "Still she had so much she made you feel / Your vacuum, which nature abhorred, / So you took your fill, for nature's sake."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Somebody, on behalf of the gods, / Had to correct that hubris."
- **Lines 23-29:** "Too late you saw what had happened. / It made no difference that she was dead. / Now that you had all she had ever had / You had much too much. / Only you / Saw her smile, as she took some. / At first, just a little."

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) adds intensity and emphasis to "The Other."

In the first stanza, for example, /s/ alliteration (along with more general [sibilance](#)) highlights the smoothness with which the "you" begins to steal from the other woman's life. Here is the first line:

She had too much so with a smile you took some.

This sibilance might also call to mind the hissing of a snake, a classic [symbol](#) of deception and temptation. All these /s/ sounds thus seem to reflect the duplicitous, envious nature of this person, who "smiles" while they steal. There's quite a bit of sibilance throughout the second stanza as well, again implying

just how sneaky and threatening this person is.

Later, in lines 15-16, /h/ alliteration highlights this person's feelings about the more successful woman they're stealing from:

Had to correct that hubris.  
A little touch of hatred steadied the nerves.

These breathy /h/ sounds might evoke this person's huffiness or haughtiness. The alliteration also subtly links the woman's "hubris" (or excessive pride) with this person's "hatred."

Alliteration combines with [assonance](#) in lines 18-19 ("collected" and "compensation"), that crisp /c/ sound adding some emphatic bite to the line.

The liquid /l/ sounds in line 20, meanwhile, draw readers' attention to the apparently inevitable imbalance between these people. One's gain results always in the other's loss; "you" take things as "compensation / For having lost," but this means that the other woman is "left" with nothing.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "so," "smile," "some"
- **Line 3:** "so," "some"
- **Line 5:** "Still," "so"
- **Line 7:** "So," "sake"
- **Line 10:** "some"
- **Line 11:** "seemed," "Still"
- **Line 12:** "screw"
- **Line 14:** "Somebody"
- **Line 15:** "Had," "hubris"
- **Line 16:** "hatred," "steadied"
- **Line 18:** "collected"
- **Line 19:** "compensation"
- **Line 20:** "lost," "left"
- **Line 24:** "difference," "dead"
- **Line 28:** "Saw," "smile," "some"



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Other" is a [free verse](#) poem whose 29 lines are divided into three stanzas of varying lengths. It doesn't follow any regular poetic form and instead feels intimate and conversational.

The first stanza has 4 lines and feels introductory in nature, the second stanza has 12 lines and the third has 13. The number 13 is often considered unlucky, and the 13-line stanza might subtly reflect the character of the "unlucky" person the speaker is addressing. Note, too, that there's a large gap of white space between line 26 ("You had too much.") and line 27 ("Only you"). This space creates a pause, a moment of dramatic anticipation, before the speaker delivers the final lines' twist.

### METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't follow a regular [meter](#). Instead, its rhythms are casual and conversational. This makes sense, given that the speaker is addressing a listener ("you") directly. Meter would likely have made the poem sound overly formal and stiff, whereas free verse makes the poem feel more intimate.

That said, the poem still sounds distinctly *poetic*. Hughes creates music here not through meter but through devices such as [enjambment](#) and [repetition](#), which allow the poem to feel intense even while the language feels ordinary.

### RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "The Other" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). A rhyme scheme would likely have made the poem sound more pleasantly musical, predictable, and formal. The lack of rhyme, by contrast, just makes the poem feel more personal, as though the speaker is speaking directly to this other person rather than performing for an audience.



## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous, genderless, and apparently omniscient. They seem to know everything there is to know about the relationship between the person they're directly addressing ("you") and the woman this person envies. From the text alone, it isn't clear what this speaker's relationship to these two people is, and, in fact, it is quite possible to read the "you" in the poem as the speaker addressing *themselves*.

While the poem itself doesn't give anything away about its speaker, context suggests that it's Hughes himself. Hughes included "The Other" in *Capriccio*, a collection that deals with his relationship with Assia Wevill. Hughes left his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, for Wevill, and Plath died by suicide a few months later. Because of this, the poem is commonly



## VOCABULARY

**Vacuum** (Lines 5-6) - Emptiness, lack, void.

**Abhorred** (Line 6) - Hated. This is an [allusion](#) to the phrase "nature abhors a vacuum," which is attributed to Aristotle.

**Took your fill** (Line 7) - Took as much as you wanted.

**Redressed** (Line 9) - Made right; corrected.

**Hubris** (Line 15) - Excessive arrogance or pride.

interpreted to be about Wevill and Plath's relationship, with the "you" of the poem being Wevill and the "other" being Plath. (Note that while the speaker presents themselves as an objective narrator of events, things were undoubtedly more complicated in real life.)



## SETTING

The poem doesn't have a physical setting at all. Instead, it focuses entirely on the relationship between the person the speaker is addressing and the woman whose happiness and success this person envies. In fact, the poem is noticeably lacking in [imagery](#) of any kind, which is pretty unusual for a Hughes poem; Hughes is famous for his imagery-driven poems about nature and animals.

The *lack* of setting emphasizes the tunnel vision created by this person's incredible envy. It's as if they're incapable of seeing what's around them because they're so focused on what they don't have. But even after they've taken "some. / Of everything" this other woman has, this person still feels empty and "unlucky." No matter how much they steal from her, they aren't satisfied. The lack of setting, then, seems to reflect this person's "vacuum"—the deep sense of emptiness that drives them to hate and steal from this other woman.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is considered one of the most important writers of the 20th century. His arrival on the scene with his 1957 debut, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was a shock to the system of British poetry; Hughes's raw [imagery](#) challenged the dominance of more restrained and formal poets like [Philip Larkin](#). To this day, Hughes remains one of the most widely read poets in the English language.

Hughes grew up in West Riding, Yorkshire, a relatively rural part of England, and he cultivated an early interest in the natural world that would influence his poetry. Hughes was both reverent and unsentimental about nature, seeing it not just as a source of wisdom and beauty (as the 19th-century Romantics like [William Wordsworth](#) often did), but also as a place full of [instinctive violence](#) and danger. Animals also occupy a central role in Hughes's poetry (most famously in the "[Crow](#)" series of poems), where they often [symbolically](#) reflect the human psyche.

"The Other" was published in Hughes's 1990 collection *Capriccio*. The poems in this collection revolve around Hughes's relationship with Assia Wevill, the woman for whom he left his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, in 1962. Plath died by suicide the following year, with Hughes's and Wevill's affair being a

contributing factor (Plath supposedly knew Wevill was pregnant by Hughes, a pregnancy Wevill aborted after Plath's death). This fact loomed over the rest of Hughes's and Wevill's relationship.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1961, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath moved from London to a small country village in Devon, England. They let their London flat to David and Assia Wevill, a pair of poets they soon invited for a weekend at their house in Devon. Hughes and Wevill struck up an affair soon afterward.

Plath quickly caught on to what was happening and kicked Hughes out of the house. Hughes spent the next few months going back and forth between the two women, trying to win Plath back even while continuing to pursue Wevill. Hughes ultimately refused to end things with Wevill, and he left Plath to be with her in London. Plath moved the family to London two months later, and, on February 11, 1963, she ended her own life.

Wevill had, for all intents and purposes, taken "Everything [Plath] had won, the happiness of it." She had her husband; she took over Plath's role as mother to his and Sylvia's children; she lived with Hughes in the house he and Sylvia had lived in; and for some time, she and Hughes were apparently happy together in spite of Plath's death.

But Hughes continued to have affairs (in fact, he was in bed with another woman, Susan Alliston, the night Plath killed herself, and continued this affair even [while promising Wevill](#) that "no other women exist"). He grew more and more distant from Wevill. They had a child, Shura, together, but [a family friend observed](#) that Hughes didn't treat her with the same affection and pride as he did his children with Plath—in fact, she says he didn't give "any indication that [Shura] was his daughter."

Wevill had apparently [staked her happiness](#) on a life with Hughes, and when it became apparent that he was never going to marry her, she decided to end her life. Afraid that her four-year-old daughter would be neglected by Hughes or else sent to a foster home, Wevill decided the merciful thing to do was to take Shura with her. In March of 1969, Wevill fed her daughter sleeping pills and then turned on the gas oven. In her suicide note, [she wrote](#) that "the ghost of Sylvia was making [her] suicidal," something "The Other" hints at in its final lines.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Ted Hughes Society's Review of Capriccio](#) — A thoughtful examination of what makes *Capriccio*, the collection in which "The Other" was published, one of Hughes's most intriguing books.



(<http://thetedhughessociety.org/capriccio>)

- [Assia Wevill, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath](#) — An in-depth look at Wevill's background and her relationship to Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. (<https://medium.com/lifes-writes/she-wanted-to-be-sylvia-plath-but-instead-killed-herself-and-her-daughter-35f6e045c6f4>)
- [Fact vs. Fiction](#) — This Guardian article, titled "Written out of history," examines the contradictions between the events surrounding Hughes's relationship with Wevill and the way Hughes later portrayed these events in his work. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/oct/19/biography.tedhughes>)
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — A Poetry Foundation biography of Hughes. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes>)

#### LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- [A Picture of Otto](#)
- [Bayonet Charge](#)
- [Cat and Mouse](#)
- [Football at Slack](#)
- [Hawk Roosting](#)

- [Relic](#)
- [Roe-Deer](#)
- [Snowdrop](#)
- [Telegraph Wires](#)
- [The Harvest Moon](#)
- [The Jaguar](#)
- [The Thought Fox](#)
- [Wind](#)



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