



A Stylistic Analysis of Transitivity Processes and their Effects in Ted Hughes' 'The Bee Meeting'

Sophie Swift

In her feminist analysis of a passage from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Deirdre Burton uses a systemic-functional model of language in order to examine transitivity. She ultimately concludes that through Plath's use of 'disabling syntactic structures' it is 'easy to see her writing herself into a concept of helpless victim' (1982: 201). This type of conclusion, which sees the female as 'victim', is reoccurring throughout studies of transitivity. For example, central to Sara Mills' work on feminist text analysis is 'the notion that women are often portrayed as passive and acted upon by the male agent' (1995: 201). In contrast to these findings, this study will carry out a transitivity analysis of Ted Hughes' poem 'The Bee God' (1998: 150) (Appendix 1). In doing so I hope to foreground Hughes' controversial positioning of himself, a male, as the 'victim' through his lexicogrammatical choices.

Throughout my study I will be using the transitivity models provided in both Burton's (1982) and Paul Simpson's work (2004), and will conclude with a contemplation of my findings from a feminist perspective. In her textbook *Feminist Stylistics*, Mills proposes a 'feminist model of text' through which she emphasises 'the interactional nature of the relation between texts and their context' (1995: 37). Critics have frequently observed Plath's 'incontrovertible presence' in Hughes' poetry (Gill, 2011: 55). 'The Bee God' in particular presents a narrative of Plath and Hughes' relationship and sees the couple as the two key participants of its transitivity processes. Thus, in line with Mills' model, when building my feminist analysis, I will support my findings with the further context of their relationship.

There are forty-one processes in total throughout 'The Bee God', of these processes, Plath is the affecting agent in twenty-nine of them. Hughes is only the agent in nine. Reflecting upon Burton's study of *The Bell Jar*, critics have noted how Plath was obviously 'unable to exert any influence over the people and objects around her' (Simpson, 1993: 154). So already it is clear that Hughes' poem exhibits a diversion from pre-existing feminist gendered transitivity studies. The nature of Plath's influence throughout 'The Bee God', and the extent to which she exerts control, will be discovered by the close analysis of specific transitivity processes.

There are twenty-six material processes in total throughout 'The Bee God'. According to Mills, 'characters who have more control over their environment' are 'realised in a higher proportion of material-action-intention processes' (1995: 145). Thus by abstracting out these material processes, the material-action-intention processes more specifically, and attributing them to their Actor participant, the participant granted the most control can be identified. Before doing so I wish to summarise briefly the three material-action-event processes within 'The Bee God' in order to establish their lack of effect upon the key participants of this study. Material-action-event processes see the Actor as an inanimate object:

- 10 The hot, shivering chestnuts leaned towards us
- 11 Their great gloved hands again making their offer

- 15 Your page a dark swarm
- 16 Clinging under the lit blossom

In lines 10 and 11 the inanimate 'chestnuts' are the Actor participants. In line 10, the process is an intransitive verb; there is no Goal of the process thereby inhibiting the 'chestnuts' from gaining any agency. In line 11 the anthropomorphic hands of the 'chestnuts', within an inherently metaphorical clause, affect a Goal 'their offer'. Because there is no obvious explanation about what this 'offer' might

be within the poem there is little evidence for an argument that might suggest the ‘chestnuts’ are granted agency here. In lines 15 to 16 a personified ‘page’ attributed to Plath, as distinguished by the possessive determiner ‘your’, is the Actor. Again this verb is intransitive thereby affecting no goal and gaining very little agency. Ultimately none of these material-action-event processes grant inanimate objects any overwhelming sense of control that might subsequently affect the transitivity study of Hughes or Plath in this poem.

Within ‘The Bee God’ there are twenty-three material-action-intention processes. Of these, only three see Hughes as the Actor participant:

3a I scoured the old hive

19b I had given you something

41a But as I stood there

Only two of these processes seem to grant Hughes any agency or control. The first process in line 3a sees ‘the old hive’, an inanimate object, as the Goal. Hughes affects ‘the old hive’ and can thereby be seen to have control over it. In line 19b ‘something’ is the Goal that Hughes affects. He gives this ‘something’ to Plath, the circumstantial element, and thus like with the ‘old hive’, can be seen to exert some control over it. The remaining material-action-intention process in line 41a, fails to grant Hughes any agency as it is an intransitive verb and has no Goal. Thus Hughes affects nothing so fails to gain a governing sense of control.

In contrast to the very small number of material processes whereby Hughes is the Actor participant, Plath is the Actor participant in nineteen material-action-intention processes. This study interprets Plath as being highly associated with the ‘bees’ described in the poem. They are her ‘new selves’ and thereby become a personification of her soul. Thus when ‘bees’ are positioned as the Actor participant they can be read synonymously with Plath. Already, by Mills’ definition, it is clear that the sheer number and higher proportion of material-action-intention processes attributed to Plath implies that she has overwhelming control over the poem’s environment. The way in which this control is accomplished will be explored further through the examination of the eight material-action-intention processes in ‘The Bee God’ that see Plath successfully affecting a goal. Two of these processes see Plath affecting inanimate objects:

3b you Painted it

7 You put on your white regalia

8 Your veil, your gloves,

In line 3b Plath, signified through the personal pronoun ‘you’, affects the Goal ‘it’. In lines 7 to 8 there are three different Goals that Plath affects through the same process, her ‘white regalia’, her ‘veil’, and her ‘gloves’. By affecting all of these inanimate objects Plath is granted control over them. The two processes in lines 17 to 18 and 21 to 22 see Plath affecting herself:

17 You and your Daddy there in the heart of it,

18 Weighing your slender neck

21 The thunderhead of your new selves

22 Tending your golden mane.

In lines 17 to 18 Plath and her 'Daddy' are the Actors in the process. Together they affect the Goal - Plath's body part - her 'slender neck'. Despite Plath's Daddy being granted the position of Actor within this process, because Plath is also Actor, any arguments that might suggest the victimization of Plath by the hands of patriarchy are compromised. In lines 21 to 22 Plath's 'new selves', the 'bees', are the Actor and again one of Plath's own body parts is the Goal. By placing Plath in the position of Actor within processes whereby her own body is the Goal, Hughes grants Plath control over her own body.

The remaining four material-action-intention processes see Plath as Actor affecting Hughes as Goal. In line 29, Plath in the form of 'the first bee' affects Hughes' 'hair', his body part, as Goal. In lines 31 to 32, Plath again in the form of a bee 'that outrider' affects Hughes as Goal 'marking' him. Here Hughes is identified pejoratively as 'the target'. In lines 42 to 43 Plath in the form of 'sticky, disembowelled bees' affects Hughes' 'hair', again his body part. Unlike Plath, Hughes does not exhibit control over his own body, instead his body parts lose agency through the material-action-intention processes that see him as the Goal of Plath's actions. The material-action-intention process in lines 35 to 36 is slightly more complex in terms of its relationship to Hughes:

35 As bees planted their volts, their thudding electrodes,

36 In on their target.

Plath, once again in the form of 'bees', is the Actor. These 'bees' affect 'their volts', the Goal, by 'plant[ing]' them. Within this process Hughes is part of the circumstantial element, 'In on their target'. He is again labelled pejoratively as the 'target'. Yet due to the possessive nature of the determiner 'their' and the passivity associated with the positioning of the noun 'target' in the clause, there is an overwhelming sense that Hughes is presenting himself here as a secondary 'target' or 'victim' of the bees' volts.

There are ten other material-action-intention processes associated with Plath, these however are intransitive - they do not affect a Goal. Despite this though, some contain circumstantial elements that arguably situate Plath in a position of dominance that still grants her a level of agency:

13 But you bowed over your bees

14 As you bowed over your Daddy.

In lines 13 and 14 the prepositions 'over', place Plath spatially in a position of authority. Simultaneously the possessive determiners 'your' heighten this authority through the objectification of both the 'bees' and Plath's 'Daddy'. They become itemized as objects of Plath's possession. Thus one can deduce that Plath gains a sense of control through the circumstantial elements in these processes.

Further examples of intransitive material-action-intention processes whereby Plath is Actor yet still manages to gain agency, are exhibited through the presence of processes that have violent connotations:

31 That outrider tangled, struggled, stung -

The processes in line 31 see Plath in the form of a bee, 'that outrider', as Actor. All three of these processes convey an image of aggression. They certainly do not comply with the passive image of Plath outlined by Burton's study whereby she discovers that Plath's only 'attempt at what is (technically) a material-action-intention process fails.' (1982: 205). Thus these violent, action, intransitive verbs, by contrast, grant Plath a degree of agency.

So far I have shown that Plath is the most frequent affecting Actor of material-action-intention processes in 'The Bee God' who, through Hughes' lexicogrammatical choices, is typified by high levels of control. This is highly uncharacteristic for a female entity in relation to previous gendered transitivity studies. For example, in her analysis of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* which, by using systemic

functional grammar, focuses on foregrounding narratives of gender in the play, Bárbara Cristina Gallardo found that ‘the material processes the male character uses have effect over the female’ (2006: 737). As has been shown, at no point does Hughes affect Plath by material-action-intention processes. Yet she manages to affect him. Moreover, a key question proposed by stylisticians throughout their transitivity analyses is ‘who does what to whom’ (Burton, 1982: 200). Thus this next section of analysis seeks to answer this question. By clarifying some of the observations already made and through a discussion of some of the remaining material processes, I hope to discern which participant is more ostensibly the ‘victim’ of the material processes in ‘The Bee God’.

As already observed, Hughes is affected four times by material-action-intention processes that see Plath as Actor, yet he never affects her. There is one other occasion whereby Hughes is affected as Goal. In line 33 he is ‘flung’. However there is no clear Actor of this process, thus one cannot discern whether this process is material-action-intention or material-action-event and no specific entity is granted agency. There are only three occasions whereby material processes actually affect Plath. The first two however can be discounted as they see her acting upon herself, which, as previously discussed, grants her an element of control over her body rather than compromising her agency. The only instance whereby Plath is affected by a material-action-intention process can be seen in lines 19 to 20 where she is acted upon by an ambiguous ‘something’.

19 I saw I had given you something
20 That had carried you off in a cloud of gutterals -

Here, the ‘something’ from line 19 becomes the Actor, and Plath the Goal. Due to the relationship between this ‘something’ and Hughes established in line 19, the process in line 20 might be interpreted as Hughes affecting Plath. However, there is clearly a lack of specificity within the context of the pronoun ‘something’ which prompts one to question what the true nature of this ‘something’ is. Consequently, due to the ambiguity that surrounds the position of Actor in this process the extent to which Plath’s agency is challenged and the extent to which Hughes can thereby be considered a participant in this process is questionable.

Overall the analysis of the material processes in ‘The Bee God’ has shown that Hughes is the most frequently reoccurring Goal. No other entity within the poem is as habitually affected. More specifically, when he is affected, Plath is typically the Actor. Whilst Plath exhibits control over her body (which is unaffected by Hughes), Hughes has no control over his own. Instead, his body is controlled and affected by Plath. This goes against previous feminist transitivity studies. For example, in her study of a romance scene in Helen McInnes’ novel *The Hidden Target*, Mills found that ‘when the male does a [material-intention] process, he does four out of six to a part of the female’s body [...] and one to her as a whole.’ Yet ‘only one out of five processes done by the female is done to the male’ (1995: 147). Ultimately she shows that the female participant is a victim of male control. Clearly Hughes has reversed Mills’ findings within his poem. Instead of feminine victimization Hughes positions himself, a male, unconventionally as the ‘victim’ of female control.

In addition to her gendered observations about material processes, Gallardo also found that when material processes are compared to mental processes with gender in mind, ‘the male acts more while the female perceives more’ (2006: 760). She also stresses the ‘excessive use of mental processes by the female character’ principally concerned with her ‘feelings and worries’ (745). Her findings suggest that mental processes are more frequently attributed to femininity. In ‘The Bee God’ there are ten mental processes. Of these, both Hughes and Plath each carry out five. Already, the lack of discrepancy regarding which participant carries out these mental processes goes against Gallardo’s conviction. Additionally, upon closer inspection, there is a clear inconsistency in relation to what the respective verb components within the clauses imply. The mental processes whereby Plath is the Sensor are wholly associated with the process of wanting:

1a When you wanted bees

- 23 You did not want me to go
- 25a You wanted the honey,
- 25b you wanted those big blossoms
- 37 Your face wanted to save me

The recurrent employment of the verb 'to want' evokes a semantic field of desire. It is a cognitive process that allows access into Plath's psyche, prompting the implication that Plath's conscience is perhaps preoccupied by, and prioritises, her own wish-fulfilment. The phenomenon components of Plath's mental processes see either Hughes, or an aspect of nature become the object of her desire. Ultimately it seems Plath's conscience is overwhelmingly characterized negatively by selfish attributes, her internal perception of her external circumstance is based entirely on her own desires.

In contrast to the portrayal of Plath's psyche, Hughes' mental processes are implemented by a variety of different verb components. Three out of these five mental processes are prefixed by the adverb 'never':

- 1b I never dreamed
- 2 It meant your Daddy had come up out of the well
- 8 I never guessed a wedding
- 12 I never know how to accept

The presence of the adverb 'never' prescribes a sense of uncertainty that seemingly condemns Hughes to a position of vulnerability. All three of these verbs are cognitive so, like Plath, imply access into Hughes' psyche. The phenomenon elements in these mental processes all contemplate a circumstance in Hughes' external world suggesting a conscious internal awareness of his surroundings. The final two mental processes attributed to Hughes in lines 19a and 41b, again contain two differing verb components:

- 19a I saw I had given you something
- 41b I thought I was safe

The process in line 19a is perceptive; it sees Hughes consciously observing and paying attention to the external. In line 41b, this process is another example of cognition, again allowing access into Hughes' internal thoughts and responding to events in the external.

Once again Hughes' poem has diverged from previous feminist transitivity studies. Instead of being 'excessive,' Plath's deployment of mental processes does not surpass Hughes'. Rather than expressing 'worries' and emotive 'feelings', the verbs used imply she is explicitly engrossed with selfish desire (Gallardo, 2007: 745). Hughes' conscience is more contemplative of the external. Moreover in stark contrast to his negative projection of Plath's psyche, Hughes places himself in a sympathetic position of vulnerability and uncertainty. This positioning, when considered in conjunction with Hughes' standing as the affected Goal of Plath's material-action-intention processes, reiterates the notion that he is the passive 'victim' within the poem.

The remaining processes in 'The Bee God' are four relational processes in lines 5, 24, 27 and 28, and one verbal process in line 46b. All of the relational processes are attributive and ascribe what

the Carrier of the process is like (lines 5, 27, 28), or what it owns (line 24). The process in line 5 has key significance to the support of my analysis so far:

5 So you became the Abbess

Plath here is the Carrier of this relational process; the attribute she is being ascribed is ‘Abbess’. She is thus placed in a position of significant power. This reiterates my transitivity findings that see Plath as the key-controlling agent, thereby amplifying the juxtaposed positioning of Hughes by contrast, as a passive ‘victim’.

The only verbal process in line 46b sees Plath as the Sayer. Here she takes the form of a ‘lone bee’, ‘calling for helpers’. By granting Plath the only verbal communication within the poem Hughes himself is silenced. Plath is ultimately granted an agency that is unachieved by Hughes, emphasising again his passivity.

My transitivity analysis of ‘The Bee God’ has clearly foregrounded the positioning of Hughes as the ‘victim’. Simultaneously Plath is clearly presented pejoratively as the governing affecting agent. Further explanation of the arrangement of these processes can perhaps be found within the context of the couples’ relationship. As Joanny Moulin observes, ‘in the case of Sylvia Plath, Hughes was accused by some American feminists of being an adulterous husband who was the chief cause of her suicide’ (2011: 16). By granting Plath control, and control over her own body most specifically, Hughes is perhaps attempting to distance himself from this negative, controlling profile. Instead he hints that Plath herself was to blame for, and had control over, her own suicide. With this context in mind, Hughes might be deemed sympathetic. However, taking on a feminist perspective that sees Hughes’ victimized positioning of himself as an ‘empty self-justification’ for his adultery’ (Perloff, 1998), this study will argue that some of the transitivity methods through which he achieves this victimised position are inherently controversial.

When comparing ‘The Bee God’ to Plath’s own Bee Poems, Marjorie Perloff notes how Plath within her poetry is ‘merely describe[ing] [...] how she feels’ (1998). Moreover, unlike Hughes, she suggests that Plath does not try to express the thoughts and feelings of someone else. Thus it is through his presentation of Plath’s mental and verbal processes that Hughes problematizes his position as the supposed ‘victim’ of this poem. By claiming to know her thoughts and feelings and quoting explicitly what she might say or think, he is effectively ventriloquizing her. Plath thereby becomes metaphorically objectified; she is a tool for Hughes’ poetic manipulation. This consequently points to the unreliability of the poetic speaker as a whole, volatising Hughes’ overall presentation of the transitivity processes within his poem and the subsequent positioning of himself as ‘victim’. Because of this unreliability Hughes’ narrative, within the context of their relationship, is ultimately reduced to a ‘redistribut[ion of] the guilt and blame as to Plath’s fate’ (Perloff, 1998). In turn, Plath arguably becomes an overarching external ‘victim’ of the narrative of ‘The Bee God’.

In conclusion it is clear that through my transitivity analysis alone, I have shown how Hughes usurps previous feminist transitivity studies. He positions himself as the ‘victim’ in ‘The Bee God’ and consistently reiterates that Plath has control, through her material, attributive-relational and verbal processes. She affects his body without him affecting many transitivity processes in return and is thus granted unconventional levels of agency. However, in accordance with Mills’ feminist model of text (1995: 37), when this transitivity analysis is reviewed from a wider contextual and feminist perspective, Hughes’ presentation of himself becomes highly problematic. He jeopardises his own poetic voice by ventriloquizing the voice and psyche of Plath. Consequently, the extent to which Hughes can truly be labelled as a ‘victim’ in relation to Plath becomes ambiguous. Ultimately the position of ‘victim’ has a dual sense. Hughes is the literal ‘victim’ of the transitivity processes within the poem whilst Plath becomes the consequential ‘victim’ of the voice of the poem through a wider feminist context.

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Appendix 1

Ted Hughes: 'The Bee God'

- 1a/b When you wanted bees I never dreamed
2 It meant your Daddy had come up out of the well.
- 3a/b I scoured the old hive, you painted it,
4 White, with crimson hearts and flowers, and bluebird
- 5 So you became the Abbess
6 In the nunnery of the bees.
- 7 But when you put on your white regalia,
8 Your veil, your gloves, I never guessed a wedding.
- 9 That Maytime, in the orchard, that summer,
10 The hot, shivering chestnuts leaned towards us,
- 11 Their great gloved hands again making their offer
12 I never know how to accept.
- 13 But you bowed over your bees
14 As you bowed over your Daddy.
- 15 Your page a dark swarm
16 Clinging under the lit blossom.
- 17 You and your Daddy there in the heart of it,

- 18 Weighing your slender neck.
- 19a/b I saw I had given you something
20 That had carried you off in a cloud of gutturals -
- 21 The thunderhead of your new selves
22 Tending your golden mane.
- 23 You did not want me to go but your bees
24 Had their own ideas.
- 25a/b You wanted the honey, you wanted those big blossoms
26 Clotted like first milk, and the fruit like babies.
- 27 But the bees' orders were geometric -
28 Your Daddy's plans were Prussian.
- 29 When the first bee touched my hair
30 You were peering into the cave of thunder.
- 31a/b/c That outrider tangled, struggled, stung -
32 Marking the target.
- 33 And I was flung like a headshot jackrabbit
34 Through sunlit whizzing tracers
- 35 As bees planted their volts, their thudding electrodes,
36 In on their target.
- 37 Your face wanted to save me
38 From what had been decided.
- 39 You rushed to me, your dream-time veil off,
40 Your ghost-proof gloves off,
- 41a/b But as I stood there, where I thought I was safe,
42 Clawing out of my hair
- 43 Sticky, disembowelled bees,
44 A lone bee, liked a blind arrow.
- 45 Soared over the housetop and down
46 And locked onto my brow, calling for helpers
- 47 Who came--
48 Fanatics for their God, the God of the Bees.
- 49 Deaf to your pleas as the fixed stars
50 At the bottom of the well.