

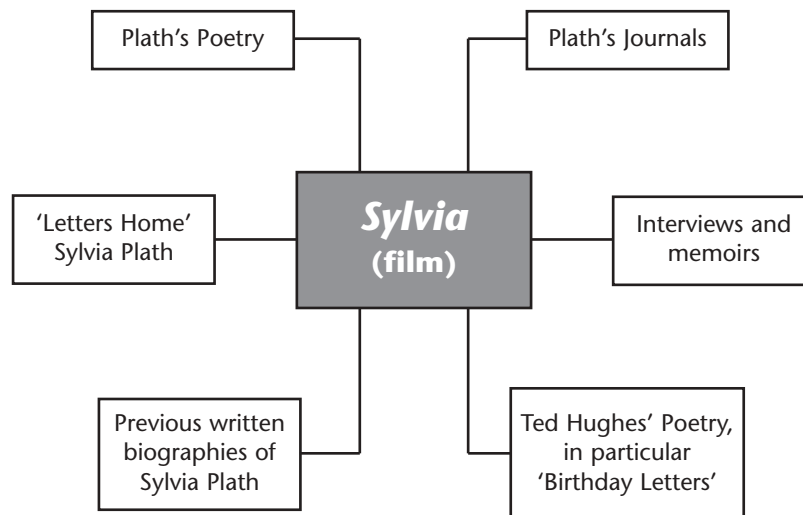
The Story of the Film

The film *Sylvia* tells the story of the poet, Sylvia Plath, from her first meeting with Ted Hughes in 1956 to her death at the age of 30. The film concentrates upon the relationship between the two poets: their marriage, the time spent together teaching in America, their return to England and the birth of their two children, Frieda and Nicholas. It portrays the passion and romance of the early relationship and its progress into jealousy, suspicion, infidelity and separation, culminating in Sylvia's suicide in 1963.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS THE BIOPIC AND BIOGRAPHY

Filmmakers and audiences seem to be attracted to biographies. The lives of 'real' people fascinate us no matter what form they are presented in – biography, autobiography, newspaper articles, television programmes, magazine articles/features and films. Yet why should this be? Why do we desire information about certain people?

In trying to write about or visually present the life of someone on film or television there are a variety of sources that we could turn to – previous biographies, letters, journals etc. When we are looking at the film *Sylvia* we are looking at a story about a relationship – between two poets, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. One could say that the film is therefore a new biography, drawing on a variety of sources as in the chart below.



This new film based on the life of Sylvia Plath raises the question of the sources that a biographer can use and also differences of styles within different forms of books that we use to find out about the lives of people. Look again at the chart above that lists some of the sources. Think about the style and purpose of each type of source. Who is speaking in each source? What is the purpose of the source? A poem has a different purpose than an interview, for example.

Task

In the following chart are listed the various forms of biography and autobiography that exist. For each one try first of all to describe the styles of each and then the possible advantages and disadvantages that would exist for the reader when looking for the 'truth' about a person's life.

STYLE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
BIOGRAPHY		
AUTOBIOGRAPHY		
DIARY		
LETTERS		
MEMOIR		
OBITUARY		
MAGAZINE ARTICLE		
FICTIONALISED AUTOBIOGRAPHY		
FILM		



FILM

The film *Sylvia* raises two questions we can explore further. Firstly, why make a film about Sylvia Plath and secondly what does the film actually tell us about her?

BIOGRAPHY / STORY

The French writer, Albert Camus, wrote that people enjoyed reading biographies because they gave us a sense of unity, or order, in a person's life, an order that is missing in our own. A biography has a definite beginning and end. When we see a film, we also expect such a unity – by the end of the film all questions that will have arisen during it will have been answered.

What could happen between an actual event taking place and its portrayal on screen?

- 1 The process of translating a moment in history onto film is like a game of Chinese whispers, which begins with the moment itself.
- 2 The next stage is the memory of those present at the scene; their interpretations of what took place may differ.
- 3 If the memory is written down, then it is subject to the vagaries of failing memory or the embellishments of the genre, for example a poem.
- 4 If the moment is to be filmed, then the intention might be to create a mood rather than adhere strictly to factual accuracy.

In starting to read a biographical piece of writing, what questions are normally in our minds? What are we looking for? Try to write down three or four things that you might want to know from a biographical piece.

Also, what are the elements of a person's life that attract us to a biography of that person? What makes a biography of David Beckham more attractive than, say, the biography of, say, your aunt or uncle.

Our expectations of a film however, are different. Whereas, in a biography we expect to be informed, in a film we probably expect to be entertained. Also expectations of a film normally arise in the first few minutes of a film.

Task

Write a list of exactly what you saw in the opening few minutes of the film *Sylvia*. What clues did this give you about:

- a) What type of film it was?
- b) What type of character Sylvia Plath would be?
- c) What other people could be involved in the story?

Whereas a biographer can take many pages giving us details about a person, a filmmaker must give the details rapidly in order to keep the story moving.

CHARACTER / PERSON

When we read a biography, we read about the life of a person. A story tells us about a character. When we see a filmed biography, a further level enters – that of the actor/actress playing a role. So, when we understand a filmic character in a biographical film there are three levels of ‘understanding’ in existence as below.

PERSON	CHARACTER	STAR
(real)	(fiction)	(real)

How far does the appearance of a star affect the way that we understand a character? Does it make any difference to our understanding both of the real person and the character? If we take the star of *Sylvia*, Gwyneth Paltrow, how far is our understanding of the role that she plays in this film coloured by other films that we have seen her in?

THE PLACE OF THE HEROINE

The first image that we see in the film *Sylvia* is that of the character Sylvia Plath. Is the story that is told in the film Sylvia Plath’s story? Does the character of Sylvia Plath fit into the normal mould given to women characters? Write a list of the characteristics that one would normally associate with a hero and then a list of characteristics associated with a heroine. Does the character of Sylvia Plath fit easily into either of these?

What is the main function of heroes within stories? If, *Sylvia* were simply a biography then one would expect the person of Sylvia Plath to take centre stage. Is this true of the film?

In many films, the heroine is a more passive character than the hero; does the character of Sylvia Plath fit this picture? List any events in the film where Sylvia is shown as a positive, active character. How is she shown in relation to Ted Hughes? Also, how is she shown in relation to the other women in the film?

A SCENE FROM THE FILM

Just before his death, Ted Hughes published a collection of poems about his life with Sylvia Plath called ‘The Birthday Letters’. In one of them, ‘Chaucer’, he recalls a walk in which Sylvia declaims Chaucer to a field of cows. He also talks about the way in which memory is incomplete and needs to be supported by imagination. In the film, the scene is set on a punt. Read the poem ‘Chaucer’ and try to recall the scene in the film.

1. Discuss the atmosphere and mood created by the poem.
2. Consider how that mood has been reflected in the film
3. Where has the film moved away from the narrative thread and tone of the poem?
4. What effects was the director trying to create?
5. Are the changes artistically justifiable?
6. Are the changes biographically justifiable?

THE INFLUENCE OF POETRY

Hughes wrote prolifically throughout his life, but maintained silence on his relationship with Sylvia until the publication of a collection of poems, ‘The Birthday Letters’ in 1998, the year of his death. The poems are, for one critic, ‘tender and elegiac acts of remembrance’.

Sylvia suffered from periodic bouts of writer’s block, but her finest poetry is generally considered to be that written in the weeks before her death, published in a volume entitled ‘Ariel’. It includes the poem, ‘Lady Lazarus’, which is mentioned in the film *Sylvia*. The theme of the poem is that of death and rebirth, and it alludes at one point to her earlier suicide attempt. The third death and rebirth referred to in the poem is a matter of critical debate. Whatever slant critics may put on the words themselves, the preoccupation with death in the collection of poems is indisputable.

- Is the fact that the couple were poets intrinsically interesting?
- Does the timing of Hughes’ publication of ‘The Birthday Letters’ add to the mystique or close the book on the subject of their relationship?
- What is the appeal of poems with an autobiographical content?
- Are poems about death intrinsically interesting?
- Does the fact that we are not allowed to print copies of these poems make them more interesting to you?



SETTINGS

The story of Sylvia and Ted follows their moves through several different countries and locations within those countries.

1. Use the chart below to list those locations in order in the **first column**. Ignore interior scenes for the moment. You can use the synopsis of the film to help you.

Geographical setting – country and kind of location (e.g. town, rural, seaside)	Dominant colours in the scene, light or dark	Season or time of year, weather	Main action that takes place

2. Now in the **second** column, write down what the dominant colours are in each location. Are they cheerful or dull? Is the lighting bright or gloomy?

3. In the **third** column, write down what season or time of year the scene is set in and what the weather is like.

4. Finally, in the **fourth** column, write down briefly what the main action is that takes place in these settings – and whether the general feeling is happy or sad.

Locations and how they are filmed and lit can often reflect the mood and tone of the action. They can have a symbolic significance. Happy scenes might have cheerful colours and be brightly lit; sad scenes might be darker or colder

Look back at your chart to see if any of the scenes match the mood and tone of the action in the way they have been shot.

[Note: don't expect every scene to match the action. Life's not like that!]



Sometimes the setting might be used to contrast with a particular character to highlight their personality. Think about the opening shots of the film set in Cambridge. What is Cambridge like? (Use the chart you have just filled in.) Chart your first impressions of Sylvia in the box below:

Appearance	Behaviour	Contrast with other people

How does Sylvia differ from her surroundings? What impression do the filmmakers wish you to have of her before she met Ted?

Now read the extract below from the shooting script of the film to see if your impressions match the intentions of the filmmakers.

EXT. CAMBRIDGE – DAY

Early morning. England of the 1950s: shades of grey and shit-brown, cars that look like hearses, PEDESTRIANS in austerity clothes hunched under the weight of a thousand years of history.

Only now, hurtling towards them is an American girl (SYLVIA PLATH) with a big flashing grin, her tyres skittering and shuddering underneath her as she barrels down the hill almost out of control.

It's clear from her face she's in love with the feeling.

She looks totally foreign, a splash of colour in a monochrome land. Even the bicycle looks different, and so it is, brand new and brightly coloured like the girl's lips and coat and shoes.

She radiates charisma, this girl, along with intensity and a fierce intelligence. But strangeness too, and an off-kilter frequency that puts the English on their back foot. An oddly charming, oddly bewildering combination of convention and unconvention, that says: 'I am special. I am going to BE someone'.



How successful was the film in conveying this first impression of Sylvia by contrasting her with the location?

THE END OF THE FILM

Before Sylvia dies she moves to a flat in London. She is a very different person to the one we met at the beginning of the film; the interior of the flat, the corridor and the scene outside are very different to the streets of Cambridge.

Task

Write the shooting script notes for this part of the film, showing how the scene itself reflects Sylvia's state of mind.

CHARACTERS

Although the film is called *Sylvia*, its major focus is the relationship between Sylvia and Ted and its creative and destructive power. Before you look at the nature of the relationship, think about both characters individually, to discover what might have attracted each to the other.

For both Sylvia and Ted, consider the following points:

1. What does he/she look like? Are there any 'trademark' items of dress or appearance that are consistent throughout the film?
2. Try to describe their personalities as shown in the early days of their relationship. Look at such things as how they behave, how others react to them, what they say and what others say about them.
3. What are their interests?
4. What do we know about their lives before they met? (Try to keep to what you discover in the film rather than what you might have discovered from other sources.)

Task

From your findings, ask yourselves if Sylvia and Ted appear to be likely soulmates.

CHEMISTRY

The scene where they meet is a fairly faithful representation of events as they actually happened according to Sylvia's journals and letters. In their interpretation of these events, the filmmakers have directed us towards a view of the nature of their attraction.

What attracts Sylvia to Ted?

What attracts Ted to Sylvia?

How is the attraction made clear in the direction of the scene?

SEX AND POETRY

According to the script, Sylvia says to Ted during their last meeting:

'We're not even two people. Even before we met we were just these two halves walking around with big gaping holes in us shaped like the other person, and then we found each other and we were finally whole. Then it was as if we couldn't stand being happy so we ripped ourselves in half again.'

Task

Identify some moments in the film where Sylvia and Ted seem 'finally whole'. How has the filmmaker signalled this to the viewer? Consider such things as dialogue, situation, setting, music, lighting etc.

Moments of fulfilment/happiness in the relationship	Evidence on screen

Intense relationships such as that shared by Sylvia and Ted in the film are dynamic and in a constant state of flux. Pick out four scenes from the film that suggest tension in the relationship:

Scene	Reason for tension	Actions, behaviour and setting reflecting the tension

From your findings, identify the major reasons why you think in the film they 'ripped (themselves).. in half'.

UNSPOKEN WORDS

The scene that brings about Ted’s decision to leave is the one showing the visit of the Wevills to Devon. There is very little conversation other than transactional or small talk in the entire scene, but clearly much is going on beneath the surface.

Task

1. Note down what clues the filmmakers have given other than words to signal to the viewer that something is seriously wrong.
2. It is probably the unspoken words that are the most important in this scene. Using the clues you have identified above, write the interior monologue of either Sylvia or Ted from the opening shots on the moor to the point where Sylvia asks the Wevills to leave. (It would be entirely wrong to try and second guess what the actual people, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes might have been going through at this point in their relationship, so deal with it as a piece of fictional drama.)
3. What new insights into the characters has the writing of the monologue given you?

TWO VICTIMS?

In any relationship that founders, there are two sides to an argument. Certainly Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes both still have their supporters and detractors who offer up reasons for the tragic sequence of events culminating in Sylvia’s death. As Ted Hughes put it in a note to Alan Alvarez, it really is no-one’s business. This begs the general discussion point:

Should this film have been made?

Does the film offer a balanced view of the reasons for the split and Sylvia’s suicide?

Task

Using scenes from the film *Sylvia* as your evidence, weigh up the portrayals of Sylvia and Ted to discover with whom your sympathies lay at various points in the film. Remember that you are working from how the filmmakers have shot the scene. They may have left the viewpoint deliberately ambiguous or they may have directed you to a particular point of view. Look for the techniques they have used to support their intended effect.

Brief description of scene	Ted’s role in the scene	Sylvia’s role in the scene	Your view
e.g. Ted arrives back hours after leaving the flat for a meeting	He is evasive. Is he telling lies or bewildered by her fury?	Jealous rage? Untrusting wife? Betrayed wife?	Your view

Use the notes you have made above to form the basis of a discussion in your group/class.



MINOR CHARACTERS

There is no secondary storyline in the film *Sylvia*. All the minor characters are there because they affect the relationship between Sylvia and Ted in some way.

Task

List the minor characters and give a brief description of their role in the story of *Sylvia* and Ted.

Name of character	Role they play in the relationship of Sylvia and Ted

How do the relationships that they have to the two central characters or the information they provide about them develop our understanding of those characters?

THEMES

The central theme of the film is the relationship between Sylvia and Ted that you have explored in a separate section. However, the relationship gives birth to a number of other related themes such as jealousy, isolation, guilt and conflict.

What other related themes have you discovered?

Write down at least three incidents from the film to illustrate each theme.

DEATH, REBIRTH AND POETRY

The film ends with the suicide of Sylvia Plath, her 'suicide note' the collection of poems that was to become 'Ariel'. Throughout the film references are made to poems, essays and plays by other writers, all in some way related to death or rebirth. The theme of death has been present from the outset

1. Identify the works of other writers used in the film and research their significance for the film.
2. Read 'Lady Lazarus', 'Pursuit' and 'Daddy' by Sylvia Plath. How do they illuminate her life and her relationships with others and contribute to the theme of death?
3. Make a note of how the idea of death or the contemplation of suicide is presented visually in the film.
4. Note down how often death is a part of the dialogue. What views of death are given?

STRUCTURE AND THEME THROUGH IMAGE AND SYMBOL

As we have said before, the narrative structure of Sylvia is very simple, working through a series of events in chronological order.

The structure is made more complex and richer through a series of repeated images and symbols that give meaning to the narrative.

Symbols are things that are used to represent something else. The opening lines of the film Sylvia are a good example of a symbol in action, where she explains how the tree is used to represent aspects of her life and ambitions. Trees appear throughout the film.

Look at how they are used to develop and explore the themes of ambition and fulfilment.



Task

Using scenes from the film Sylvia as your evidence, weigh up the portrayals of Sylvia and Ted to discover with whom your sympathies lay at various points in the film. Remember that you are working from how the filmmakers have shot the scene. They may have left the viewpoint deliberately ambiguous or they may have directed you to a particular point of view. Look for the techniques they have used to support their intended effect.

SYMBOLIC INTERIORS

We have looked at the outdoor locations for the film, but much of the action takes place indoors. Fill in the factual chart below before discussing the issue of how the interiors have been used to do more than show off the paintwork.

Brief description of scene e.g. flat in America	Decoration/ lighting Grey/dark blue/ dingy	Size of set Cramped rooms	Who is in/who comes in/who goes out Sylvia in/Ted comes in later	Action that takes place A row over Ted's dealings with a student

Task

From your findings, can you make any generalisations about how the interiors have been used to symbolise the relationship between Sylvia and Ted?

Now do the same exercise with windows and ask yourself who is looking out from inside and who is looking in from outside. Can you make any generalisations about how windows have been used to enhance the themes of the film?

Other repeated images relate to cooking, jewellery and the colours red and white. In groups carry out a mapping exercise for one of these like the one you have done for interiors, but making up your own column headings.

Can you find any more repeated images in the film?

Discuss your findings with the class as a whole to build up a complete picture of the structure of imagery and symbols in the film.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The film was originally to have been called 'Ted and Sylvia'. Would this have been a more appropriate title in your view?
2. Wife, mother, academic and poet: what does the film have to say about the balance between these aspects of Sylvia Plath's life?
3. This film was not made with the participation of the Plath/Hughes family. How important is it for films based on real people and events to be made with the cooperation of their families? Does the fact that Ted and Sylvia are famous and widely published mean that, as subject matter, they belong to the world at large?
4. What other sides to her character do we see? In the last scene between Hughes and Plath in the film, he tells her he can't go back to her; in real life he told her they would be back together by the summer. How does this additional biographical knowledge affect your attitude towards the characters and their subsequent behaviour?
5. What contribution did the music make to your enjoyment and understanding of the film?

