The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes Study Guide

The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes by Janet Malcolm

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Silent Woman by Janet Malcolm is essentially a review of the biographies that have been written about poet Sylvia Plath. Sylvia's short life and career ended prematurely when the thirty-year-old writer took her own life. Since that tragedy, at least five major biographies have been written as well as several other memoirs of note written by people who knew her on a personal level. When the biographers ventured into Sylvia Plath territory, they were met by Olwyn Hughes, older sister of Ted Hughes, who was married to Sylvia. Olwyn was the literary agent over the works of Plath and it was she who writers would have to contact for permission to include full versions of Sylvia's poetry and other works in their manuscripts. Buy Olwyn played a much bigger role than that. She became the protector of her younger brother Ted and she came at the writers like a pit-bull with fangs bared.

When Sylvia committed suicide, she and Ted had been separated for several months. He had been involved in an adulterous affair with another woman which ultimately destroyed the marriage. But there were many first-hand accounts and anecdotes that indicated that Sylvia was suffering from chronic depression and perhaps even more serious mental and emotional conditions. Dating back to her youth, some who knew Sylvia accused her mother of failing to address her mental problems; in fact, she served to enable them. Some critics believed that Sylvia's unstable mental condition was as much to blame for her suicide as was her husband's infidelity.

After Sylvia died, Ted Hughes was given the majority of the blame for Sylvia's untimely death. Almost from the moment she died, Ted's actions were scrutinized and criticized by those who felt his abandonment of Sylvia was what pushed her over the edge. The majority of the biographies and memoirs placed this blame squarely on his shoulders, disregarding much of the evidence that Sylvia was difficult to live with and impossible to please. When he published "The Journals" by Sylvia posthumously, he introduced her works by indicating that he had omitted some of her writing, destroyed others and lost still others. Ted was accused of everything from cashing in on his dead wife to repressing her artistry. But Hughes mainly stayed in the background and allowed his ferocious sister to deal with the "libber" writers—as she referred to women who felt a man [Ted] was repressing a woman [Sylvia]—and others that they felt were libelous and mean-spirited.

Malcolm focuses much of her attention to Bitter Fame, which was written by Anne Stevenson. Stevenson is the only writer to work on her book in conjunction with Olwyn and, not surprisingly, the only book that places some of the blame for Sylvia's tragedy on Sylvia herself. By the time the book was completed—which took four long years—Stevenson felt that the work wasn't hers and felt reluctant to have it published. She suggested that Olwyn Hughes be given credit for co-writing the book, but the publisher refused. Olwyn got her way—the book was the only book that Ted and Olwyn thought credible, although there were still portions that they disliked.

By interviewing the writers of the biographies and memoirs, Malcolm has provided an interesting backdrop to the work of a biographer, a thankless job that often pleases no one. As she said, a writer of fiction is never taken over the coals for his plot or characters, but most everyone doubts some aspect of non-fiction writing. By digging into the various biographies of Sylvia Plath, Malcolm provides insight into the life and career of a mysterious figure whose real life will forever remain an enigma.

Part One: Chapter I

Part One: Chapter I Summary and Analysis

Ted Hughes wrote two introductions to "The Journals" of Sylvia Plath. In the early 1982 introduction, Hughes commented how in the last several years of her life, Sylvia had found her true voice as a poet and discarded all the other false ones—the warring "false selves." At the end of this introduction, he made the shocking revelation that he had destroyed some of her last, unpublished journals in order to save her children from reading them. One journal that was not destroyed was lost. In the second version of his introduction, published sometime later in 1982, he hinted that perhaps he could still put his hands on the one journal that was lost—indicating that he may have been less than truthful in his first message. In the second introduction, he indicated that her journals had been destroyed, avoiding blame for their destruction.

Sylvia was thirty years old when she committed suicide, and Ted was thirty-two. They were separated at the time of her death. Sylvia stuck her head in a gas oven. Her two children were safe in their beds where she had sealed them off from the gas and had left them bread and milk to eat when they woke. Sylvia was disturbed over Ted's unfaithfulness. After Sylvia's death, Ted struggled the rest of his life with the public's fascination with Sylvia's brief life and her artistry. Ted felt he was unfairly scrutinized in discussions about his wife. Many articles and book were written about her and there were many public debates about her life and work. Ted claimed many were incorrect and lamented society's propensity to gossip about things about which they had no knowledge; i.e., Sylvia's life and their relationship.

The biography is the last assault on a defenseless dead person. The biographer is often seen as selfless and saint-like, sacrificing time and effort to ensure that the person's life is perfectly portrayed rather than just another gossip or worse—a grave robber who takes what he wants and leaves behind that which doesn't fit his or his publisher's preconceived scenario. Yet the biography genre is popular and highly regarded. It has been elevated to a prestigious stature even though its veracity as a whole has not stood up to scrutiny.

There were at least five major biographies written about Sylvia Plath. Bitter Fame, the Plath biography by Anne Stevenson, was by far the best. But the author, Anne Stevenson, was derided for her introduction in which she gave almost co-equal credit to a family member for the material. This is a taboo practice among many biography writers and editors who feel that a book written in conjunction with a family member is tainted. Since Ted Hughes was interviewed for the book, as well as his sister, Olwyn, it seems as though the book should have been given more credit rather than less. And since Anne Stevenson mentioned in her introductory remarks that she was careful not to inflict undue pain on the vulnerable, it was to many her admission that she held back information, or dirt, in favor of saving Sylvia's children from pain. Stevenson had broken

the rule of being relentless and ruthless in writing a biography and therefore the finished product was suspect.

Part One: Chapter II

Part One: Chapter II Summary and Analysis

Author Janet Malcolm had attended the University of Michigan at the same time as Anne Stevenson. Anne was a year ahead of Janet and, as the daughter of a philosophy professor and an artsy, poetic non-conformist, she was greatly admired by Jane and her friends. Janet had started writing herself around that time but would have never compared herself to Anne, whose writing was considered to be in another stratosphere. Anne, who was always surrounded by attractive boys at school, eventually settled on an Englishman who she married and moved with to England. Anne went on to become a renowned poet whose career Janet followed throughout the years.

When Anne wrote the biography of Sylvia Plath, she found that she and Sylvia had gone through the same teenaged angst and sexual frustrations of the American youth of the 1950s. Girls lied so much about their behavior that it rang true when Ted referred to Silvia struggle to find her true self. Responding to her mother about her criticism of Sylvia's dark, "frightening" poems, Sylvia pushed back, citing her mother's inability to deal with the world's reality—Hiroshima and the Inquisition as examples.

In Bitter Fame, Stevenson writes of Plath as a sober and confused perfectionist whose suicide as well as the inspiration for her art remain mysteries. Reading it, Malcolm became less in touch with Sylvia Plath the woman as the more dominant artistic voice of the poet began to emerge. Critics of the book argued that they knew Sylvia Plath more intimately than did Stevenson and that her words should be ignored. Dido Merwin, a "friend" of Plath, finally felt the freedom to express her true feelings for the poet—she was a horrible wife and a martyr. She was surprised Hughes had stayed around as long as he did. Merwin's account of Plath initially had more credibility because she based it on her own experience which led readers to question Stevenson's work.

Part One: Chapter III

Part One: Chapter III Summary and Analysis

The first "official" bad review of Bitter Fame came from A. Alvarez in the New York Review of Books. Like Merwin's account, Alvarez's memories of Sylvia Plath became more autobiographical than biographical. When speaking of her suicide, the reader learned of his own attempts. Alvarez claimed the Plath expected to be rescued and did not intend to end her life. Alvarez knew Sylvia and Ted as a couple. He was initially much more impressed with Ted—thinking of Sylvia as a dowdy little housewife. He thought that Ted was one of the best young poets of the time. He reviewed Sylvia's collection, The Colossus, and gave her props for technique, but felt there was an underlying flaw in her poems stemming from emotions that were being withheld. A year later, when he saw them again, it was Sylvia who seemed to capture his attention.

By the fall of 1962, the couple was separated. Ted lived in London and Sylvia and her two children in Devon. She would frequently stop by Alvarez' studio to visit. She told him of two previous suicide attempts—one in which she took an overdose of pills and another when she almost ran off the road. Alvarez backed off and discouraged the budding relationship. Alvarez' memories of Sylvia and Ted appeared in his memoir, The Savage God, which was serialized in the Observer. The piece described how Ted's infidelity led to Sylvia's suicide. Ted immediately saw the destructive nature of Alvarez' piece and had the second installment pulled from the Observer—of course, he could do nothing about its inclusion in the book. Naturally, when Stevenson's book came out and contradicted Alvarez's account, he was highly critical of it and questioned its author. Stevenson had dared to place the blame for the failed relationship on Sylvia more than on Ted.

Part One: Chapter IV

Part One: Chapter IV Summary and Analysis

Linda Wagner-Martin wrote a biography of Sylvia Plath. She had worked with Olwyn Hughes, Ted's sister, and with Ted himself. They at first were cooperative, but upon completion of the manuscript, their relationship deteriorated. Ted cut approximately fifteen thousand words and Olwyn pointed to her manuscript's inaccuracies. Alvarez applauded Wagner-Martin for not caving to the demands of the "evil" sister as Anne Stevenson had done. Alvarez saw himself as the defender of the poor dead women whose husband had abandoned her.

Another critic, Ronald Hayman, wrote in the Independent that Stevenson's biography was vindictive. He derided her proclamation that, with Bitter Fame, she hoped to dispel the fantasies and rumors surrounding the life and death of Sylvia Plath. Hayman cited her cruelty in blaming Sylvia for the failed marriage and portraying Ted as patient and innocent and reluctant to be unfaithful. That Sylvia's behavior would have caused anyone to leave her was absurd. Instead of Bitter Fame righting the ship, it only gave the controversy new life.

Janet Malcolm wrote to Olwyn Hughes in an effort to get an interview with Ted. The long and confused letter she received from Olwyn in response only reiterated her disdain for the Sylvia Plath myth. To Olwyn, Sylvia was a liar and had created the false myth about herself. Beyond that, Sylvia was mentally ill, something her mother had never addressed and in fact enabled for years. She lauded Stevenson's biography and complained about the others, especially Alvarez's memoir. After her experience with writers, she had lost faith in mankind. Olwyn served as the literary agent of the Plath estate and had control of the poet's works. As such, most biographers were compelled to work with her in their attempts to include any of Plath's poems in their publications. Dealing with Olwyn for three years, Malcolm saw none of the expected egotism or narcissism; rather, Olwyn's intentions were to protect her younger brother and her family name.

Part One: Chapters V and VI

Part One: Chapters V and VI Summary and Analysis

In chapter five, in 1971, a literary critic declared that what stood out about Plath's works was that it was not nice. Plath's "not nice" quality was what set her apart from her contemporaries. This quality is why Plath appealed to feminists—it took courage in the 1950s and 1960s for a woman to depart from the requirement to be a "nice girl." Her novel The Bell Jar appeals to women but is filled with poison and electricity. The book is based in part on Plath's own life—in particular, her 1953 suicide attempt and her bumpy relationship with her mother. The book was first published under a pseudonym, Victoria Lucas. Later, when it was published in America under Plath's own name, her mother complained to the publisher that it was a work of ingratitude on the part of her daughter. Hughes had published The Bell Jar under Sylvia's name because it would sell more copies, and he wanted to use the proceeds to purchase a beautiful home he had spotted in Devon.

Mrs. Plath later asked Ted to allow the reprinting of letters in which Sylvia wrote to her and which displayed her nice daughter side. Letters Home was published and showed an inarticulate, sloppy Plath—a side of her that she would have never allowed to be published. Aurelia Plath wanted the "not nice" Sylvia to be the writer for posterity. Letters Home had the unintended consequence of confirming to some that Sylvia's relationship with her mother was to blame for her emotional problems. Mrs. Plath's actions served only to open up her dead daughter to the world to further and unrelenting scrutiny. The letters include Sylvia's feelings about Ted—when she first met him and when she fell in love with him. Sylvia gushed about her Adonis, how he towered over the stumpy people and how she lusted for him at first sight. Mrs. Plath may have published Letters Home in retaliation for Ted having published The Bell Jar under Sylvia's name. But Ted had the last word when he published some of her journals. Janet Malcolm entered an arena in which Mrs. Plath, Olwyn Hughes and Ted Hughes were the favorite targets.

In chapter six, Malcolm met with Olwyn Hughes in February 1991 in London. She read about Sylvia's first impression of her future sister-in-law: Olwyn was selfish and a changeling who would never age but nonetheless liked her. Her self-centered side was displayed as Olwyn seemed only to be obsessed with how put upon she was in having to deal with those who wanted access to Sylvia's works. She was not completely happy with Anne Stevenson's book. Olwyn didn't write her own book because she wasn't a writer and, as Ted told her, no one would have believed her account. Olwyn was corresponding with another writer, Jacqueline Rose, who was writing The Haunting of Sylvia Plath. Olwyn had nothing good to say about Rose who Malcolm was planning to meet with. At the end of lunch, Olwyn handed Malcolm a letter describing the anger that relatives of dead writers—including Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath—have for biographers.

During the six years that Ted and Sylvia were married, Olwyn had probably only been in Sylvia's presence a handful of times. Olwyn worked in Paris the entire time of the marriage. She left that job only after Sylvia died, when she returned to London to help Ted with his children and become the overseer of her literary estate. Like many others, Olwyn came to know Sylvia after her death. She came to think of her as the woman she wished her brother hadn't married. During one confrontation, Olwyn accused Sylvia of being overly critical. Sylvia did not say a work but only glared. They parted without discussing the incident. The silence was aggressive in that it cut off communication much as a suicide does. It doesn't allow the other person the chance to understand or explain and it leaves those behind as the "bad guys." By profiting from the dead poet's works, Hughes had opened himself up for more criticism. The "libbers," as Olwyn called them, wanted to wrest from Hughes the works of the dead poet that he inherited and is able to hide and edit at his whim.

Part One: Chapters VII and VIII

Part One: Chapters VII and VIII Summary and Analysis

In chapter seven, after lunch, Olwyn accompanied Malcolm to one of the houses where Sylvia lived. The woman who had found the flat for the Hughes recalled how Sylvia eschewed her suggestion to buy appliances and furniture second-hand. It was an American thing to want to sleep on a good bed and have a reliable refrigerator. Sylvia had told her mother about the dismal kitchens and bathrooms in England. However, after she and Ted separated, Sylvia chose to stay in England because her dark and edgy writing was more accepted there. In her youth, Sylvia was known for her American neatness and shining blond hair, long but always clean and in place. Toward the end of her life when she found her artist's voice, she also found her brown hair—the blond had been bought. According to Alvarez, she developed a problem with hygiene, mentioning her smell as "sharp as an animal's" (p. 55) Alvarez also noted that her once reserved persona was replaced with an aggressive one, most apparent when delivering readings of her poetry.

Alvarez's remarks placed Sylvia's suicide in an "if only" scenario, the subtext of which places the blame of her death on others. She could have been saved from herself if only her mother had addressed her mental condition or if her husband had only been more attentive to them. Adding fuel was Alvarez's memory of her being diminished and helpless. Bitter Fame mentioned a cloth beneath Sylvia's head as she inhaled the gas fumes and a testimonial statement by her doctor that she had been in a dire mental condition. These new nuggets of information heightened the animosity people felt toward the adulterous husband and the cruel sister-in-law. The public was more comfortable seeing Sylvia as a victim. There is more interest in Sylvia's work because she wrote dark poems about death and then died young.

In chapter eight, two friends of Plath, Elizabeth Sigmund and Clarissa Roche, had perpetuated the story of the frail and helpless Sylvia and the heartless Ted. Sigmund witnessed Sylvia weeping over Ted's infidelity, claiming that she had given her whole heart to Ted and couldn't get it back. Sigmund included the incident in a memoir printed in the New Review. Of course, this evoked Ted's rage. In the two months after Ted had left Devon was when Sylvia wrote most of her Ariel poems. Sylvia wrote to her mother how she hated Ted but that she was writing the best poetry of her life—emotions trapped for years were surfacing.

Olwyn arrived at the house that Sylvia had rented in London. Sylvia had written to her mother how excited she was about the house—it had been the residence of none less than W. B. Yeats. Seeing the house where Yeats lived and Plath died, as in all such cases did not live up to the expectation one has of visiting a place where a horrendous or historical event took place. In Sylvia's Daddy, she creates what some critics thought was an inappropriate metaphor in ginning up images of Jewish concentration camps to relate her own emotions over her father. Another critic George Steiner lauded her for

keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive but still questioned her right to apply it to her own life. The enigma that surrounds Sylvia is tied to what was expected of the reserved young girl and the emotionally charged, dark work she actually produced. That dichotomy is what keeps people entranced.

Part Two: Chapter I

Part Two: Chapter I Summary and Analysis

Janet Malcolm traveled to Durham in North England to meet with Anne Stevenson. She had met her a year after Bitter Fame had been published. She had appeared at a meeting of the University Women's Club in London where she was being taken to task for her portrayal of Sylvia in her book. She tried to defend herself and explained that some of her work was tainted by the controlling hands of Olwyn. The press had decided that Anne was a bad player in the Plath saga and would not settle for any compromise. In their interview, Anne told Malcolm of the hurt she felt when a critic had accused her of being envious of Sylvia's talent.

Before she met with Stevenson, Malcolm read a transcript of a recent lecture Anne gave and felt heartened that Anne had found a stronger voice in defense of Bitter Fame. She began the lecture describing how her and Sylvia's background as well as ideology were similar. They had both married Englishmen and moved to London. She had assumed that Sylvia, like she, had difficulty adjusting to the new culture. She explained that she had been commissioned to write a story about Sylvia Plath in a series for Penguin Books called Lives of Modern Women.

Anne sent a completed draft to Ted for his comments, who sent it on to Olwyn. That's when Anne became involved with Olwyn, who complained to her about the other biographers who had so mistreated her brother. She gave Anne the Dido Merwin account that was unflattering to Sylvia to review. Merwin's angry bite was almost laughable to Anne, but she decided to take it into consideration. Olwyn asked Anne to abandon the hundred page manuscript she wrote for Penguin and write a full novel about Sylvia. Olwyn would assist her. She promised to get her an agent and publisher who would provide a sizable advance. Ted wrote a positive letter that revealed more details about his relationship with Sylvia and promised to help with her new project, although that never materialized. Anne and Olwyn worked on the book together—Olwyn arranging interviews with friends who knew Sylvia and Ted; allowing her to work in the large Plath Library; and, reading and critiquing her work chapter by chapter. Unfortunately, Anne couldn't put the genie back in the bottle and Olwyn continued to ride herd over her. Anne felt uncomfortable with the final product, asking the editor to give credit to Olwyn as co-author. But he refused, compelling Anne to include the disclaimer about the material in her introduction.

Part Two: Chapter II

Part Two: Chapter II Summary and Analysis

On the way to Durham, Malcolm read a recent letter from Anne in which she provided her take on Sylvia and her work. Sylvia had used poetry as a way to stage her own psychodrama. Anne felt that there was enough misery in life that it was inappropriate for Sylvia to use art in such a way and that by so doing she had lost all perspective of her importance in the world. Malcolm was surprised that Anne confessed to having had a problem with alcoholism and could relate to the despair that Sylvia surely felt though for different reasons. There was something that Anne fundamentally disliked about Sylvia. Her extremism and narcissism were things that Anne deplored.

Anne had a rather turbulent life herself, with multiple marriages, and was guilt-ridden at times when she chose writing over family. She left her second husband and children to go off with a poet, Phillip Hobsbaum, who helped her complete her book of poetry, Correspondence. As Sylvia had struggled in her own way to find her artistic voice, so had Anne. Ted described the battle she had to get her short story published in the Ladies Home Journal, which she was never able to do. Ted felt that Sylvia's work lacked the emotion that lay inside her and that she had to dig deep to find it. There was always a close association between Sylvia's work and her personal life. In his introduction of her The Wishing Box, Ted intimates that the only subjects that excite her imagination are all autobiographical.

Malcolm drew a parallel between Anne's failed relationship and her guilt-ridden past to the subservient role she took on with the willful Olwyn and why she bent to her demands so readily. Olwyn certainly had her own agenda in the content of Bitter Fame, but Malcolm had the sense that Anne had one as well.

Part Two: Chapter III

Part Two: Chapter III Summary and Analysis

During her last year at Smith, when she met Ted, Sylvia was involved with a young man named Richard Sassoon. Although she was extremely attracted to Ted, he left for England with no mention of seeing her again. In a letter to her mother, she mentioned meeting Ted but reiterated her love for Richard, who apparently did not return her passion. In her journal entries, Sylvia lamented that if she couldn't be with Sassoon she would have to settle for someone else because she didn't want to be a "nun" and wanted to have children. Sylvia was in deep despair over Sassoon's abandonment of her.

When The Journals, which included this time period, were published, they were met with derision—first because of Ted's admission that he had lost a journal and secondly because of a statement that Frances McCullough, the editor, had made her own omissions to the journals. It left many thinking that the words and spirit of Sylvia had been repressed. The mention of what was not there reduced the credibility of what was there. McCullough defended her cuts as standard when publishing such raw material as journal entries that are rough and were never intended for publication. Sylvia's failed confrontation with Sassoon in Paris comprised the most interesting and least tampered with entries. When Sylvia discovered that Sassoon had left town for the entire spring break, she was at first distraught. But her youth and spirit lead her to put those emotions aside and have fun with other men she met in Paris.

In a letter to Sassoon at the end of their relationship, Sylvia told him that maybe she wanted too much but really wanted nothing from him. "Perhaps when we find ourselves wanting everything it is because we are dangerously near to wanting nothing" (p. 100). When she wrote her "Ariel" poems near the end of her life, that concept had devolved to "close to wanting nothing, to wanting nothing" (p. 100). Malcolm concluded that Plath was battling against depression with her romantic imagination—a battle which she ultimately lost.

Part Two: Chapters IV, V and VI

Part Two: Chapters IV, V and VI Summary and Analysis

In chapter four, Anne continued to be very candid when Malcolm visited her in her home. She hadn't been able to interview Alvarez or Ted because Olwyn basically disallowed it. Perhaps, Anne mused, Ted was in more control than it appeared and Olwyn was playing bad cop to his good cop. Anne was fairly certain that Ted had only been unfaithful with Assia Wevill, but that Sylvia had reason to be jealous since women were throwing themselves at Ted. Tragically, Assia, who had one child with Ted, emulated Sylvia's death by gassing herself in 1969. Ted asked that Anne keep Assia's story out of Bitter Fame and she complied. Ted went through ten years of hell after Sylvia's death. Anne didn't want to add to his misery by drudging up the Assia story. Anne liked Olwyn but could never shake her control and knew that her book would have been much better without her interference. She had thoughts about not publishing it but in the end could not let four years of work go down the drain.

In chapter five, Anne's early days in England were much like Sylvia's—neither was prepared for the culture shock. That's when Anne picked up the habit of drinking. She reached for drink much as Sylvia reached for suicide. Almost every writer, Anne concluded, has some form of depression which stemmed from the internal nagging that the writer was not living up to his or her potential. Anne had never contemplated suicide, but there were many times she wished she were dead or felt that the artistic part of her was indeed dead. After her interview with Anne ended, Malcolm read a stack of letters that Anne had given her. Most were between Olwyn and Anne and provided the atmospherics of the raging battle that Anne endured while writing Bitter Fame. Biographers love letters since they are the fossils of emotions. When a writer cannot write what he has been told (Olwyn allowed Anne to read letters but not quote them), it presents an impossible situation for the writer. He knows relevant information but cannot use it. The writer is haunted by the knowledge since he cannot unread what he has read.

In chapter six, if nothing else, Olwyn's letters to Anne were a testament to a collaboration that should have never occurred. Olwyn fueled the self-doubt that all writers have within them. The letters are belittling, accusing Anne of a being unprofessional and untalented. Olwyn defended her and Tom's decision not to allow Anne to interview him directly, claiming that filtering her questions through Olwyn would be much more efficient. Finally, Anne had enough and wrote to Olwyn in February 1988 to not contact her again. She also told Olwyn that she wasn't "too stupid" to write the book by herself but had been so bullied and so exhausted from fighting with her that she had been zapped of energy and the will to write the book. Anne told Olwyn of the personal suffering her persecution brought on during the four years of tumult—damaged eyesight, indigestion and loss of her joy in life. After the book was published, Anne put her anger behind her and thanked Olwyn for her support. Olwyn still complained that

she should have had someone else write the book. But Olwyn had won the war—she took over the book and it became what she wanted it to be.

Part Two: Chapter VII

Part Two: Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

Malcolm visited Alvarez, who thought that Bitter Fame was an example of "female bitchiness" and might have been considered the authoritative version of Sylvia's life had he not brought it down with his review. To Alvarez, Anne was a minor writer writing about a major writer and thus there was a natural envy. Her lack of talent, he went on, was probably why Olwyn and Ted chose her to write the book. They saw her as a person they could manipulate. Alvarez commented on how woman were overwhelmed by Ted's presence. He didn't know exactly what went on in his marriage to Sylvia and felt it was none of his business. Alvarez rejected Sylvia's advances to him because he had just become involved with another woman who eventually became his second wife and because Sylvia wasn't his type physically. He loved her intellect and spirit and talent, but that's where it ended.

Alvarez had sold his papers to a library which Malcolm visited. In a letter to Ted, Alvarez was excoriated for publicly airing the details of Sylvia's suicide in his memoirs. Ted raged on how he had taken the pristine memory his children had of their mother from them. He also called Alvarez' assertion that there was a professional jealousy between him and Sylvia to be absurd. Alvarez responded that his work was honest and not one of sensationalism. It, in fact, was a tribute to Sylvia. He thought the children would one day appreciate the truth about their mother rather than having to deal with erroneous and malicious rumors. Alvarez was insulted that Ted had chosen to think he had written about his relationship with Sylvia in order to cash in. To assuage Ted's hurt artistic side, Alvarez wrote that he felt Ted and Sylvia were the best poets of their generation. Angered even more by Alvarez' response, Ted wrote back that he could not fathom that Alvarez thought he was honoring Sylvia by making her death a public spectacle and that his words did nothing to allay the gossip surrounding her but only served to fuel it. If Alvarez had intended his work to contain the real story, he would have asked Ted to be the co-author.

Year later, the two men met again and renewed their relationship. But Ted's words still stung Alvarez many years later. Alvarez ended the interview with Malcolm by concluding that Ted could never accept the fact that Sylvia's life and death was in the public domain and he could do nothing to change that.

Part Two: Chapters VIII and IX

Part Two: Chapters VIII and IX Summary and Analysis

In chapter eight, Malcolm visited Elizabeth Sigmund, who had only good things to say about Sylvia. She was a friend of Sylvia's for only a year, but it was during the time of her marriage troubles and suicide. Elizabeth blamed Ted immediately after Sylvia's suicide and never stopped blaming him. Elizabeth portrayed Olwyn as being envious of Sylvia's talent and beauty. Elizabeth recounted an incident, soon after Sylvia's death, in which Ted all but confessed to being responsible for Sylvia's death. Of course, Ted was not available to verify the incident and Elizabeth's memories could have been faulty. Olwyn was a frightening person. Elizabeth had played poker with her a few times and was afraid that Olwyn was going to slap her when Elizabeth won a hand. Elizabeth was very aware of Olwyn's low opinion of her. She mentioned that Ted, Carol (his wife) no longer speak to Olwyn.

In chapter nine, Malcolm interviewed Clarissa Roche, another friend of Sylvia's, at her home in Somerset. On her way, she asked the taxi driver to detour to North Tawton, where Sylvia had died and where Ted currently lived. She felt like a stalker when she arrived, another person who had joined the league of those intruding on Ted's life. But her curiosity compelled her on—she wanted some sense of where Sylvia had lived and died. The ghost of Sylvia had become part of Ted's life. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, he defended his stance of publicly disassociating himself from Bitter Fame. He instinctively knew that he was the only person involved in Sylvia's life whose account would but completely disbelieved by those who had already decided he was responsible for Sylvia's death.

Part Three: Chapters I and II

Part Three: Chapters I and II Summary and Analysis

In chapter one, Clarissa first knew Sylvia when she was teaching at Smith in 1957-58. Even though Sylvia had less than kind things to say about Clarissa, and in particular about her husband, Paul, Clarissa maintained the non-biased professional in writing about Sylvia. Sylvia resigned from Smith when she and Ted decided to make a living on their writing. Sylvia saw a therapist who felt that her relationship with her mother was central to her problems. Ted was seen as a father figure. Sylvia wrote in her journal that the fight at the end of the school year had caused her to lose faith in him. She asked why the wife was the last to see the husband's "ulcer." At school, Sylvia had seen Ted walking with a young girl. Was he unfaithful as she surmised, or had she over-reacted? Anne Stevenson chose the second scenario. She believed Hughes, who claimed the girl was a student—but what else would he have said? In fiction, the reader always trusts the writer because there is no counter-story. In non-fiction, the writer is always vulnerable to skepticism.

Since her death, Ted had served two masters—the protector of his children's mother and the literary artist who wanted her work to be her legacy; but by so doing, one failed the other. Sylvia demonstrated her violent nature when she characterized her rude behavior in a confrontation she had with young girls cutting flowers from a public park while she was doing the same thing, as her "not-nice/true-self." In the entry she stated that she was certain she had the ability to commit suicide, murder a woman and wound a man. In The Bell Jar, Esther does not wash her hair because she'd have to do it again the next day, which recalls the memory of Alvarez noticing that Sylvia's hair was smelly. Esther, like Sylvia, had tried to commit suicide.

In chapter two, Clarissa had embarked on a biography of Sylvia after her disappointment with that of Edward Butscher, which both sides of the Hughes/Plath war seemed to dislike. With no access of the archival material, Butscher used newspaper files and libraries as references and interviewed Plath's teachers, friends and colleagues and produced material that paralleled many of Sylvia's journal entries. But the author made many presumptions and speculations. The Hugheses were appalled by the book, Method and Madness, but would came to think it passable when the biographies by Paul Alexander (Rough Magic) and Ronald Hayman (The Death and Life of Sylvia Path) were published. They were mean-spirited and almost destroyed Hughes. They took the liberty of embellishing incidents to suit their pre-conceived notions. Alexander walked a narrow line just short of being sued for libel. A "confidential" source told Alexander of an incident in which Ted tried to choke Sylvia to death, and this alleged incident was included in his book with no further verification. Mrs. Plath was upset by Butscher's book in that he included only negative comments about her. Malcolm got very little out of her visit with Clarissa other than her strong dislike of the Hugheses and a few fading memories of Sylvia.

Part Three: Chapters III, IV and V

Part Three: Chapters III, IV and V Summary and Analysis

In chapter three, Malcolm wrote a letter to Jacqueline Rose about an incident between them but did not send it. The unsent letter is often an important element in writing a biography. It provides the true feelings of a person at a specific time. There were letters from Mrs. Plath to Ted that were never sent but yet were relevant in the overall story. Rose conducted herself well in the interview, never losing sight of the meeting as a professional exchange, despite the niceties of good food and tea.

Rose wrote her book after Stevenson and Wagner-Martin had written theirs. She only dealt with Olwyn when needing permission to quote entire poems. All cooperation ended when Ted was sent to manuscript of The Haunting of Sylvia Plath. In her book, she took to task Bitter Fame as a cause célèbre that was concocted by the Hugheses. In her book, Rose defends Sylvia in a way that no other biographer had dared. She defied the frightening Olwyn and called out Ted for repressing and editing Sylvia's work post-suicide. There is an intellectual sheen to The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, but Malcolm admitted that she sided with the Hugheses and Anderson. Ted was outraged by Rose's inference that in Rabbit Catcher, Plath questioned her sexual identity. Rose responded that the homosexual references in the poem was mere fantasy on Plath's part—not a reference to her own life. Ted said that in some countries, such an inference could result in homicide. Rose took it as a threat—Ted said she was being ridiculous. It was Rose's opinion that Ted and Olwyn would take any and all critiques about Plath and her works as personal and unjustified. Rose's book was published in 1991 to mainly positive reviews.

In chapter four, Olwyn resigned as literary agent to the Plath estate, although she continued to defend her brother to writers and editors whenever she deemed necessary. She wrote Malcolm a letter indicating that she liked Sylvia, that she and Ted were happy together and that she recognized Sylvia as major poet. Malcolm had another run-in with Olwyn, who felt she took Sylvia's side when a former boyfriend she interviewed felt Sylvia had a borderline personality. Olwyn thought the same thing and took Malcolm's reaction as an effrontery to her. After this little dust-up, the two again forged a somewhat peaceful relationship.

In chapter five, in late 1991, Malcolm met with Trevor Thomas, who lived in the flat below Sylvia when she committed suicide. Thomas had written a memoir about the time he knew Plath, titled, Sylvia Plath: Last Encounters. Thomas didn't like Ted or Sylvia, partly because they rented the apartment he wanted. He found the Hugheses rude and self-centered. One day she appeared at his door, red-faced and crying. She said she would not live long and was worried about who would take care of her children. Then she went into a tantrum about her husband being stolen away by another woman. On the eve of her death, she insisted on paying for some stamps she got from Thomas. If

she didn't pay, how could she be right before God, she asked him. She stood in the hallway for quite a while. Thomas finally excused himself since he had to get up early for work. As it turned out, the gas seeped down and Thomas passed out until 5 pm the next day. He missed the entire commotion of the police and ambulance at the residence.

Thomas was careful about his comments since Hughes had already sued him for claiming that on the night of Sylvia's funeral, Ted held a big party with bongo drums playing loudly in the flat where Sylvia died. Thomas admitted that it was a total fabrication. Thomas thought Sylvia was just a housewife until right before her death when she showed him a review of The Bell Jar in the Observer. Thomas, ill and in his seventies when Malcolm visited him, was still afraid of the possibility that Ted would sue him and take everything he had. Malcolm felt her biggest reward in meeting with Thomas was to see the inside of the building where Sylvia lived and died.

Characters

Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath is the subject of the biographies and memoirs that author Janet Malcolm investigated during her search to find the definitive version of the life and untimely death of the poet and writer. Sylvia was seen as a neat American girl with golden blonde hair when she moved to London after graduating from Smith College. Her sweet and conservative appearance was misleading—admitting herself that she had a "not-nice" side. Her poetry was darkly exciting and even characterized as poisonous and did not match her perfect exterior.

Sylvia married British poet Ted Hughes with whom she had two children. After six years of marriage, Ted fell for another woman and the couple separated. It was then that Sylvia's life fell apart, although there is much evidence that she had been suffering from mental and emotional problems most of her life. But immediately after Sylvia gassed herself, the finger of guilt pointed at Ted and the blame was unrelenting.

One of Sylvia's first works was the novel The Bell Jar. Her ambition was to be a writer of fiction, feeling that her poetry was just a step to that end. However, what Sylvia became known for before her death to some extent, but especially after her death, was her dark poetry. She had several collections including "Colossus" and "Ariel" that have become popular with poetry fans. After she died, Ted published some of her journal entries in a collection titled The Journals.

Most of the biographies written about Sylvia's life place the blame for Sylvia's misery squarely on Ted's shoulders. However, Bitter Fame is one biography that sees the tragedy as one of shared blame. Which often occurs, Sylvia's poetry and other works became more popular after her death—due, at least in part, to the scandal and conflicts that surrounded her life and death.

Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes is a British poet who was married to the subject of the biographies which author Janet Malcolm was investigating in hopes of determining the definitive life story of Sylvia Plath. Ted and Sylvia lived in London and had two children. After six years of marriage, Ted became involved with Assia Wevill and ultimately Ted and Sylvia separated. Sylvia was so distraught over her failed relationship that she ended her life three months after Ted left. Ted was immediately blamed for her tragic end and had to fight off criticism and harsh accusations ever since.

Some years after her death, Ted published some of Sylvia's journal entries in a volume titled The Journals. In his introduction, he explained that to save the pain of his children he edited some of her works, destroyed others and lost still others. He was raked over the coals for his actions. He was accused of using his dead wife to make money and

was excoriated for suppressing a woman's artistry. After getting lambasted for his actions, he corrected his words in a second introduction that softened his words, walking back his claim that some of Sylvia's works had been lost. In this second version, he deflected the blame for the destruction of some of Sylvia's journals to unnamed third parties.

Ted and his sister Olwyn fought off this criticism and did their best to limit the damage from biographies of Sylvia, the majority of which portrayed Sylvia in a sympathetic light and blamed the most likely target—the unfaithful husband—for Sylvia's death.

Olwyn Hughes

Olwyn Hughes was the older sister of poet Ted Hughes. Olwyn was the literary agent for the works of Sylvia Plath. Writers needing to quote Sylvia's works had to get permission from her. Olwyn was unrelenting in protecting her brother's name and reputation.

Anne Stevenson

Anne Stevenson is the author of Bitter Fame, a biography of Sylvia Plath. Anne is the only author who worked closely with Olwyn Hughes in writing her book. Her book was the only biography that Olwyn and Ted did not detest.

A. Alvarez

A. Alvarez was a friend of Sylvia and Ted's during the years of their marriage. He wrote a memoir about his relationship and roundly criticized Bitter Fame as being inaccurate and engineered by Ted and Olwyn Hughes.

Edward Butscher

Edward Butscher wrote a biography about Sylvia Plath's life titled Method and Madness. Butscher's biographical offering was one that both the Plath and Hughes forces agreed on - they both found it deplorable.

Elizabeth Sigmund

Elizabeth Sigmund wrote a memoir of her friendship with Sylvia Plath. Elizabeth was a loyal friend to the end. She had nothing but good things to say about Sylvia and bad things to say about Hughes.

Trevor Thomas

Trevor Thomas lived in the apartment below the flat where Sylvia lived with her children and ultimately committed suicide. He wrote a memoir about his encounters with Sylvia and Ted. Ted sued him for writing that Ted threw a boisterous party replete with bongo drum music on the night of Sylvia's funeral. Thomas admitted that the story was a complete fabrication.

Richard Sassoon

When Sylvia first met Ted Hughes she was involved with Richard Sassoon. He did not return the passion she had for him. In a letter to her mother, she decided if she couldn't have Richard, she'd have to settle for another man since she didn't want to be a nun.

Aurelia Plath

Aurelia Plath was Sylvia's mother. Many friends and associates of Sylvia laid part of the blame for Sylvia's death on Aurelia who never dealt with Sylvia's emotional problems. Aurelia had Letters Home published—it was a compilation of letters that Sylvia wrote to her mother. She wanted them published so the world would remember Sylvia as a nice girl.

Objects/Places

Massachusetts

Sylvia Plath was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts.

University of Michigan

Authors Anne Stevenson and Janet Malcolm both attended the University of Michigan.

Smith College

Sylvia Plath attended Smith College and also had a short stint teaching there.

England

Sylvia attended Cambridge University in England. She also made England her permanent home after she married Ted Hughes.

Devon

After Ted Hughes left Sylvia, she lived in a flat in Devon with her two children.

23 Fitzroy Road

Sylvia lived her final days in a flat at 23 Fitzroy Road, Devon, London, England. Strangely, enough it was a former residence of W. B. Yeats and it is where Sylvia committed suicide.

Plath Library

Olwyn Hughes was named the literary agent for the writings of Sylvia Plath after her death. Olwyn was stingy in cooperating with some biographers in giving them permission to quote Plath's works.

Paris

Olwyn left her position in Paris to help Ted with his children after Sylvia died and to become the literary agent for Sylvia's works. Paris was also the site of Sylvia's confrontation with Richard Sassoon, a lover who was distancing himself from her.

The Haunting of Sylvia Plath

The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, was written by Jacqueline Rose. The Hugheses did not cooperate with Rose, but she was not timid about defying them in completing her book as she saw fit.

Bitter Fame

Bitter Fame was the biography written by Anne Stevenson. It is the book that the Hugheses hated the least. Stevenson cooperated with Olwyn in writing her book but felt it was not truly her work because it was interfered with too much.

Themes

The Challenges of Writing Biographies

After Sylvia Plath's death, speculation grew and rumors were rife about her life and death. The scandal of her failed marriage, which was not earth-shattering when she was alive, became overblown and distorted in the minds of some insiders and a cause célèbre in the thoughts and opinions of others. Ted Hughes, who had left Sylvia for another woman three months before her suicide, was the easy target of those who thought that his actions pushed the fragile Sylvia over the edge. Others related that Sylvia was not easy to be around and that she had been suffering from depression and perhaps even from bipolar disorder for most of her life.

A line was drawn sharply between the two sides when the biographers, most of whom genuinely wanted to write the definitive story of Sylvia's life and death, emerged on the scene. But because the insiders were so sharply divided on the blame and were not satisfied to let the controversy die down, the writers were placed in a precarious position. Although many biographers do not enter into a war zone like the one that developed after the death of Sylvia, most biographers do have to grapple with conflicting information. Sylvia's case was extreme perhaps because she was so young when she died and most of her contemporaries and relatives were still living. Relatives and associates of the subjects of biographies who have passed on don't interfere was much.

Janet Malcolm, author of The Silent Woman, points out that biographers and non-fiction writers on other topics are far more likely to be scrutinized about their facts and assertions than a fiction writer who has just created the characters and stories himself. In a Newsday review of The Silent Woman, Christopher Benfey comments that "not since Virginia Woolf has anyone thought so trenchantly about the strange art of biography." The word "art" suggests that the artist, or writer, creates his own story/biography from the facts and information he is given. This theory holds true in that each of the major biographies and memoirs written about Sylvia Plath are different in small and big ways and that each writer has put his own touch on the story. The biography is the meeting place of art and reality.

Family Ties

When a tragedy occurs in a family, its members often retreat together and use their energies to support one another. As often as not, the reputation that individual family members want to protect is their own. The tragedy that struck the Plath and Hughes families was the suicide of Sylvia Plath. Sylvia left behind her mother, Aurelia, who was naturally despondent over the death of her daughter. There was speculation at the time of her death that Sylvia had suffered from emotional and perhaps even mental problems for most of her life, a subject which Aurelia avoided.

There was a good amount of anecdotal information that Sylvia was difficult to be around. Her mother, although mainly silent on the subject of her daughter's stability and personality, was determined that the world remember Sylvia as a "nice girl." She pushed for Ted Hughes, Sylvia's estranged husband, to publish the letters that Sylvia sent to her mother over the years. The letters were vanilla and non-controversial as most such letters would be and really didn't portray the various and darker dimensions of the artist and eccentric that Sylvia became. Ironically, a few people placed blame on Aurelia for never addressing her daughter's problems as she was growing up. But in death, Aurelia wanted to make sure everyone knew she had raised a nice daughter.

On the Hughes' side of the tragedy, Ted Hughes' older sister Olwyn was as protective as a mother bear with her cubs when it came to those who besmirched the name and reputation of her brother, and by extension, her entire family. Olwyn "worked" with the writers, but the moment that there was a hint of a negative word about her brother, she withdrew her cooperation. The recounting of even minor incidents was looked on by Olwyn as taboo if Ted was made at all to look in the wrong. Olwyn really didn't want anything written about her brother. The only accounts she favored were those that placed blame on Sylvia for her own demise. Olwyn wished that her brother had never been involved with Sylvia who, in her opinion, was unstable and ruined her brother's life.

Blame and Accusation

When the thirty-year-old Sylvia Plath placed her head in a gas oven and ended all her problems, there was an immediate and natural reaction by those close to her to attempt to understand why someone so gifted and talented and young would want to end her life. Such an incident is confusing and frightening to those left behind. In an attempt to mitigate that fear and find clarity, people are not satisfied to allow the incident to go unexplained and unresolved; rather, by concluding that the demons that drove a person to such action do not exist within them and that her circumstances, unlike theirs, were unique and even pathetic. In that way, those left behind feel resolved by explaining away the incident, gaining distance from it and feeling safe in the certainty that they are nothing like that sorrowful figure.

A fast-track to feeling apart from such a tragedy and to "understand" it is to place blame on others. By accusing those left behind in a suicide, like in the case of Sylvia, the terror is deflected away from individuals who have an "ah ha" moment by deciding that it was Ted who was to blame. Blame and accusation is a simple way in which to allay fears and self-doubt that such an event causes in those close to such a troubled person. Or to say that Sylvia was difficult and was unstable is another way to separate self from a personal association with the incident. The damage that Mrs. Plath and especially Ted suffered for being accused of the responsibility for the death of their loved one was not a consideration in those who felt more comfortable placing blame and distancing themselves from the tragedy.

Style

Perspective

In investigating the writing of the many biographies of Sylvia Plath—at least five major tomes—Janet Malcolm wrote her book The Silent Woman in the first person narrative. As she describes her interviews and interactions with the various biographers, friends and associates of the dead poet and Sylvia's strong-willed sister-in-law, Olwyn Hughes, Malcolm becomes a character in her own book, which focuses on the difficulty of writing about the life and death of the perplexing and enigmatic Sylvia Plath. Not only did she interview writers, Malcolm, being a writer herself, provided special insight for the reader as the account progressed. She was able to describe and explain the writer's perspective with ease and professionalism.

There are all indications that Malcolm was careful to portray each writers' point of view of the experiences they had in writing their books. As a writer, Malcolm has the instinct to look beyond cursory and ostensible explanations to the subtext of the writer's feelings and reactions. She is able to see that Elizabeth Sigmund is a loyal friend and may be biased in her recollections, as witnessed by her insistence that Sylvia was always in the right and Ted always in the wrong.

Dealing with Olwyn, who was by all accounts difficult to work with, Malcolm saw through the tough veneer to an older sister who was trying to protect her younger brother and a good daughter who was trying to preserve her family's reputation. Dealing with others, like Jacqueline Rose and Clarissa Roche, she recognized the professionalism they maintained despite being challenged by circumstances. Visiting Trevor Thomas, who lived in the apartment beneath the flat where Sylvia committed suicide, she found that only the experience of being in the building was important. Thomas was an opportunist had lost credibility when he fabricated a story that Ted threw a big celebratory party on the night of Sylvia's death.

Tone

Author Janet Malcolm has written a very thorough and detailed look into the machinations that form the backdrop of the writing of a biography. Since Malcolm is an author of note, it is obvious that she has regard and respect for the profession and for the writers and has first-hand knowledge of how difficult the job of writing a book, especially a non-fiction book which will receive intense scrutiny, can be. Yet Malcolm writes with clarity providing enough details to be informative but staying clear of going into territory that would too technical and confusing for most readers. With that in mind, it is safe to say that in putting The Silent Woman together, Malcolm wrote with respect for both the writer and the reader.

Malcolm makes reading interesting and favors interspersing her sometimes professorial writing with dramatic rhetorical flourishes. By so doing, Malcolm lightens the tone of otherwise heavy subject matter. For example, when speaking of the incident in which Ted Hughes walks back his first introduction to The Journals and replaces it with one that places him in a more favorable light, Malcolm creates a neologism when she refers to his reversal as a "Houdiniesque" escape. When Malcolm is referring to Anne Stevenson's book as tainted from too much interference, she makes a series of artful metaphors about the state of Stevenson's work: "The wrapping was coming undone, the label looked funny, there was no nice piece of cotton at the top of the bottle" (p. 11). Malcolm deftly employs hyperbole and irony when she refers to how Stevenson's attempt to set the record straight for the Hugheses backfires and "the patient got sicker from the cure."

Malcolm illustrates her literary background by making a subtle reference to Greek mythology when she refers to the Hugheses eating "pomegranate seeds," referring to the story of Persephone who was lured by Hades into eating "pomegranate seeds", which forced her to return to the underworld. This metaphor has a similar ring to it as "making a deal with the devil."

Structure

The Silent Woman by Janet Malcolm is separated into three major parts. Part One is comprised of eight chapters which serves as an overview of the biographies and memoirs that were written following the death of the poet, Sylvia Plath. This section provides the backdrop for the warring sides in the aftermath of Plath's suicide at just thirty years of age. In this section, the reader sees everyone taking their corners and making a stance on who was to blame for the death of the young woman. Most writers decided that since Ted Hughes, who was Sylvia's husband, abandoned Sylvia and their two children for another woman, that the blame should rightly be laid at his feet.

With the foregoing premise laid out, Part Two of The Silent Woman delves into the one biography that placed at least some blame on Sylvia herself. The nine chapters in this section are largely devoted to the writing and behind-the-scene machinations that led to Anne Stevenson's book, Bitter Fame. Working in close coordination with Olwyn Hughes, older sister and the palace guard of her brother's reputation. Anne was cowed and intimidated by the scrappy Olwyn who was relentless in protecting her brother's name and in fighting off the "libbers" who saw Sylvia as the victim in her relationship with Ted.

The five chapters in Part Three contain Malcolm's discussions and interviews with some of the other writers who wrote biographies on Sylvia based on letters, anecdotal accounts and interviews with friends and colleagues. She spoke with others who wrote personal memoirs and essays of their friendships and encounters with Sylvia and Ted. Ted and Olwyn Hughes did not cooperate with these individuals in their works. In this section, and indeed throughout the entire book, Malcolm tries to pin down the truth about Sylvia's life and tries to ferret out the lies and rumors for what they were. Malcolm

tries to understand from what perspective and bias each of the individuals were basing their works and conclusions on.

Following the book is an exchange between Ted Hughes and Janet Malcolm about some points in The Silent Woman that he found in error. Ted had defended himself from the moment of Sylvia's death forward. This afterword indicates that Ted's defensive posture will probably never end.

Quotes

"The first version is a short, lyrical essay constructed on a single Blakean theme—the theme of a 'real self' that finally emerged from among Plath's warring 'false selves' and found triumphant expression in the Ariel Poems, which were written in the last half year of her life and are the whole reason for her poetical reputation."
Part One, Chap. 1, p. 3

"The branch of the law that putatively protects our good name against libel and slander withdraws from us indifferently. The dead cannot be libeled or slandered. They are without legal recourse."
Part One, Chap. 1, p. 8

"We lied to our parents and we lied to each other and we lied to ourselves, so addicted to deception had we become. We were an uneasy, shifty-eye generation."
Part One, Chap. 2, p. 15

"But the most frightening thing she said was, 'When you give someone your whole heart and he doesn't want it, you cannot take it back. It's gone forever."
Part One, Chap. 8, p. 60

"The journals and letters are the record of Plath's struggle against clinical and existential depression by means of the various manic defenses offered by the romantic imagination."
Part Two, Chap. 3, p. 100

"Olwyn is the emblem of the failure that every successful piece of work also is—the ghost of the impossible ideal that gave it its life and does not survive its development and completion. The Olwyn force wins only when the writer bow to its power and puts down his pen."
Part Two, Chap. 6, p. 118

"It is humiliating to me and to her mother and her brother to have her last days exhumed in this way, as you do in your memoir, for classroom discussion."
Part Two, Chap. 7, p. 124

"Memory is notoriously unreliable; when it is intertwined with ill will, it may become monstrously unreliable. The 'good' biographer is supposed to be able to discriminate among the testimonies of witnesses and have his antennae out for tendentious distortions, misrememberings, and outright lies."
Part Two, Chap. 8, p. 133

"Swept away by her sense of being wronged, Plath sinks deeper and deeper into bitter bathos, writing of 'the fake excuses, vague confusions about name and class. All Fake. All false. . .It is awful to want to go away and to want to go nowhere.'"
Part Three, Chap. 1, p. 153

"'I wondered at my split morality,' she writes. 'Here I had an orange and a pink rosebud in my pocket and a full red rose squandering its savors at home, and I felt like killing a girl stealing armfuls of rhododendrons for a dance.'"
Part Three, Chap. 1, p. 157

"But it isn't only our secrets that survive us; evidently, every cup of coffee we ever drank, every hamburger we ever ate, every boy we ever kissed has been inscribed on someone's memory and lies in impatient readiness for the biographer's retrieval."
Part Three, Chap. 2, p. 164

"The preservation of the unsent letter is its arresting feature. Neither the writing nor the not sending is remarkable (we often make drafts of letters and discard them), but the gesture of keeping the message we have no intention of sending is. By saving the letter, we are in some sense 'sending' it after all—we are not relinquishing our idea or dismissing it as foolish or unworthy; on the contrary, we are giving it an extra vote of confidence."
Part Three, Chap. 3, p. 172

Topics for Discussion

What were the two issues that may have caused Sylvia Plath to commit suicide? Who felt she may not have really wanted to die? What were the circumstances of her suicide?

Why did some critics and friends have a negative reaction to Ted Hughes when he published The Journals? What happened to some of her journals after her death? How did the two introductions by Hughes to these works vary? What may have been his motivation for changing his first introduction?

How did many writers and critics react to the actions of Olwyn Hughes? Why did Olwyn react the way she did to some of the biographies that were written about Sylvia? How did she feel about Sylvia? Who was Olwyn determined to protect?

Why did biographer Anne Stevenson make a disclaimer in the author's notes in her book Bitter Fame? Why did most critics disparage Bitter Fame? Why was Olwyn difficult to work? Why was Anne reluctant to publish Bitter Fame and why did she want to include Olwyn as co-author?

What was the main reason Janet Malcolm wanted to write The Silent Woman? How does the title of her book relate the story of Sylvia Plath? What biography did Malcolm consider the most credible? What critique did A. Alvarez have of Bitter Fame?

What were signs that Sylvia Plath may have been suffering from mental or emotional problems? What incident inspired her poem, "Rabbit Catcher?" When she recalled the incident in the park where the girls were picking flowers, what alarming statement did she make about murder and suicide?

Why did author Janet Malcolm refer to letters as crucial to a biographer and as "fossils of emotion?" What is the significance of reading "unsent" letters? Why are writers of non-fiction less believable than writers of fiction?