

# The Bell Jar



by Sylvia Plath

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## The Bell Jar: Introduction

*The Bell Jar* was first published in London, England, in January 1963, less than one month before its author, Sylvia Plath, committed suicide by asphyxiation. Published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas, the novel opened to some positive reviews, although Plath was distressed by its reception. In 1966, *The Bell Jar* was published in England under Plath's real name. By the early 1970s, it had been published to many favorable reviews in the United States.

The short, heavily autobiographical novel details six months in the life of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood. In the narrative's opening chapter, Esther, an over-achieving college student in 1953, is spending an unhappy summer as a guest editor for a fashion magazine in New York City. After her internship ends, she returns

home to live with her mother, grows increasingly depressed, suffers a mental breakdown and attempts suicide, and is institutionalized. By the book's conclusion, the hospital is about to release a somewhat improved Esther to the "real world."

*The Bell Jar* functions on many literary levels, but it is perhaps most obviously about the limitations imposed on young, intelligent American women in the 1950s. A brilliant woman with literary aspirations, Esther peers into the future and does not like her choices. She can learn shorthand—as her mother strongly encourages—and land some menial office job after college, or she can marry, live in suburbia, and nurture her husband. What she really wants to do—make a living as a writer—seems unlikely, especially in a profession with so few feminine role models.

Also complicating her situation, Esther, a student on a full-time scholarship, is surrounded by people from families much wealthier than her own; not having the financial resources of her peers further limits her choices.

As we understand today, *The Bell Jar* relies heavily on Plath's own life experience. Like Esther, Plath attended Smith College on scholarship, earned top grades, published poetry at a young age, and majored in English. Like Esther, she did a summer internship in New York City, suffered a mental collapse, and was institutionalized. Both eventually recovered to the extent they were released from psychiatric units into the "real world." While Esther's future, by the novel's conclusion, remains uncertain, Sylvia Plath's recovery only lasted a decade: On February 11, 1963, she elected to end her own life.

## The Bell Jar: Sylvia Plath Biography

Remembered today for her horrifying death as well as for her impressive body of literature, Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932 in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, to Aurelia Schober and Otto Emil Plath. In 1940, her father, a professor of entomology, died, an event that left lasting psychological scars on Plath. References to her dead father permeate Plath's work, including *The Colossus* and *The Bell Jar*.

In 1942, Aurelia Plath found work teaching in a medical/secretarial program at Boston University. The family settled in Wellesley, Massachusetts. An excellent student, Plath showed enormous determination to get her fiction published. She submitted forty-five pieces to the magazine *Seventeen* before they published her story, "And Summer Will Not Come Again" in 1950.

At Smith College, she wrote poetry, was elected to various class offices, and received prizes for both her prose and poetry. That this gifted woman had many insecurities is obvious in one of her letters to a friend, which reveals "for the few little outward successes I may seem to have, there are acres of misgivings and self-doubts." Part of Plath's frustration lay in what she perceived as a choice between becoming a free-spirited poet or choosing the wife/mother alternative.

In the summer of 1952, she was chosen as a guest editor in *Mademoiselle's* College Board Contest. The prize, a month of employment at the magazine in New York City, did not elevate Plath's mood. Despite the numerous frills her expense account afforded her—living at the Barbizon Hotel, expensive meals, meeting celebrities—Plath found the overall experience to be artificial. Her general disillusionment, dating experiences, and interactions with her boss and co-workers figure prominently into the first half of *The Bell Jar*.

Plath returned home after her employment ended and learned that she did not get accepted into the summer writing course that she had counted on. Her miserable subsequent months—including confused attempts to establish her career goals, a highly publicized suicide attempt, electroshock therapy, institutionalization, and recovery—are apparent in the second half of *The Bell Jar*.

Plath returned to Smith College in January 1954, graduated *summa cum laude* in June 1955, and won a Fulbright fellowship to study at Cambridge University in England. There, she met aspiring poet Ted Hughes, to whom she was immediately attracted. They married in June 1956. In 1957, the couple left England and settled in Northampton, Massachusetts, where Plath taught freshman English at Smith College. Considered an outstanding instructor, Plath also wrote poetry and worked on a preliminary draft of *The Bell Jar*.

In 1959, she and her husband returned to England; in 1960 her collection of poetry *The Colossus* was published by William Heinemann. Its initial reviews were not encouraging, although certain critics praised Plath's gifts for language. In April, 1960, she gave birth to a daughter, Frieda.

For the next year, Plath did not write much. A busy wife and mother, her health was poor, having suffered a miscarriage and an appendectomy. However, by spring 1961, she was working on *The Bell Jar*. She applied for and received a Saxon fellowship. In February, 1962, she gave birth to a son, Nicholas.

By summer 1962, her marriage to Ted Hughes was dissolving. He left Plath and their children; a devastated Plath now wrote poems at a phenomenal rate, sometimes one a day. *The Bell Jar* was published in January, 1963.

Although generally depressed in the last year of her life, Plath had one joyous experience. In December, 1962, she and her children moved into a flat in which the poet William Butler Yeats had once lived. But with her poor health, the rigors of raising two children by herself, and not having received the critical acclaim she desired, Plath ended her life in February, 1963.

Since her death, Plath's reputation as a writer and a cult figure has grown, and much of her work has been issued posthumously. More than thirty years after her death, Plath biographies are published with almost clock-like regularity, and critics still analyze her most famous poetry, as well as her more obscure work.

## The Bell Jar: Summary

### New York: Chapters 1-9

Sylvia Plath's fictionalized autobiography, *The Bell Jar*, records seven months in the life of Esther Greenwood. In the summer of 1953 Esther has just finished her junior year in college. She is working in New York City as a writing intern at a fashion magazine. It is June, the same month in which Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are executed by electrocution. The Rosenbergs had been convicted of treason for allegedly selling atomic secrets to the Soviet Union (as it was then called). Esther lives at the Amazon hotel for women with other magazine interns, including Doreen. Her sarcastic remarks on the other women's primness echo Esther's own feelings. Though successful and intelligent, Esther begins to doubt her own abilities to continue performing at such a high level. Her depression deepens as the summer progresses.

Esther and Doreen skip a party sponsored by the magazine, going out instead with Lenny Shepherd, a disc jockey, and his friend. Esther introduces herself as Elly Higginbottom from Chicago, in order to disassociate herself from the experience. She leaves Doreen at Lenny's apartment and returns to the Amazon. Doreen returns much later, drunk and knocking on Esther's door.

One morning, Esther muses on her depression-induced inertia: "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired." Then her boss, Jay Cee, calls Esther into the office, concerned about her waning enthusiasm for her work. Esther tries to reassure Jay Cee, not revealing that she feels two conflicting pressures. On the one hand, she has a desire for a writing career. On the other hand, she feels that social norms are pushing her toward the more practical pursuits of

shorthand and motherhood. At a luncheon sponsored by *Ladies' Day* magazine, Esther indulges in the grand spread of delicacies while she entertains memories of her own less privileged life. All the women who attend the luncheon later suffer from acute food poisoning.

Esther recalls her past relationship with Buddy Willard, a boy from her hometown who is now a medical student at Yale. Buddy visits Esther's college to go to a dance with Joan Gilling, a student there and a girl from Buddy's and Esther's town. Before the dance, however, he asks Esther for a date and later they begin regularly seeing each other. During one of the following summers, Buddy sleeps with a woman with whom he works. Esther learns of his infidelity to her just before he contracts tuberculosis and enters a sanatorium. Esther determines to avenge herself and assert her independence by sleeping with a man. When in New York, she goes on a date with a man named Constantin, but nothing happens.

As Esther waits to have her photograph taken for the magazine, she feels her sadness and uncertainty welling up. She is called to pose and she recalls:

When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn't know.  
"Oh, sure you know," the photographer said.  
"She wants," said Jay Cee wittily, "to be everything." I said I wanted to be a poet.  
Then they scouted about for something for me to hold.

Jay Cee suggested a book of poems, but the photographer said no, that was too obvious. It should be something that showed what inspired the poems. Finally Jay Cee unclipped the single, long-stemmed paper rose from her latest hat. The photographer fiddled with his hot white lights. "Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem."

Though Esther tries obediently to smile, she bursts into tears before the photograph is taken. On her last night in New York, she accompanies Doreen to a country club dance where Esther is nearly raped by a rich man named Marco

### **Suburban Boston: Chapters 10-13**

In July, Esther returns to her mother's home in suburban Boston and becomes increasingly depressed. Having been denied admission to a writing course she had planned to take, she cannot decide what to do instead. For several weeks, she does not shower and is unable to read or write. She develops insomnia. On the urging of her mother, Esther sees a psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon. After one electroconvulsive therapy session, Esther becomes more and more suicidal, poring over reports of suicides in the tabloids and considering various methods of self-slaughter.

After a failed attempt to work as a hospital candystriper, Esther visits her father's grave and grieves for him for the first time in her life. Having spent the last of her savings, she determines to act on her suicidal impulses. She descends into the cellar of her mother's house, conceals herself in a remote crevice, and swallows fifty sleeping pills.

### **Hospitalization: Chapters 14-18**

Esther, lying partially blinded in a suburban hospital, fades in and out of a coma. She is transferred to a psychiatric ward in a Boston hospital. Philomena Guinea, who had endowed the scholarship which enabled Esther to attend college, learns of Esther's situation and removes her to a private hospital in the country. Mrs. Guinea, a writer of popular novels, only intervenes because Esther's mother assures her that the root cause of Esther's suicide attempt is not emotional distress over a boy but over her writing.

At the private hospital, Esther's depression is still profound but she is intrigued by Dr. Nolan: "I didn't think they had woman psychiatrists." Though Dr. Nolan promises Esther that she will not be subject to the kind of

electroconvulsive treatment she received at Dr. Gordon's clinic, Esther is still wary.

Joan Gilhng, Esther's college acquaintance who sporadically dated Buddy Willard, arrives at the hospital. She shows Esther some newspaper clippings that describe the police and her mother searching for and eventually finding the comatose Esther. The nurses give her regular insulin injections. She suffers insulin shock (which is intended to serve the same purpose as electroconvulsive therapy) and is revived with glucose treatment. Esther's mother brings her roses for her birthday, which Esther throws in the wastebasket. After that visit, Dr. Nolan informs her that she will no longer have to receive visitors, which pleases Esther.

As Esther improves, she moves to another unit in which the most stable patients live. Esther again undergoes electroconvulsive therapy, which she finds slightly less painful than her previous experience. Both Esther and Joan receive letters from Buddy Willard. Joan confesses that she has never had romantic feelings for Buddy, but that she "likes" Esther. Esther, who had accidentally discovered Joan in bed with another woman patient, rebuffs her advances.

Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she feels constrained by the thought that she will have to sacrifice her career if she were to marry and have children. The doctor arranges for Esther to be fitted with a diaphragm, which, like all birth control devices, was illegal in Massachusetts at that time. Esther feels enormously liberated.

### ***The Bell Jar Suspended: Chapters 19-20***

Esther, all but cleared to be discharged from the hospital, determines to return to college for the winter term. She lives at the hospital while she waits for the beginning of the semester, having been discouraged from living with her mother. While on a pass, she meets a young Harvard professor named Irwin. She has sex for the first time in her life with him and afterward bleeds profusely. Irwin drives Esther to the Cambridge house in which Joan has been living since her recent release from the psychiatric hospital. Joan, alarmed by Esther's hemorrhaging, takes her to the emergency room. Soon after this incident, Joan returns to the psychiatric hospital and subsequently hangs herself.

After a great snowstorm, Buddy Willard visits Esther at the hospital and she relieves him of the guilt he feels over her hospitalization and Joan's suicide. She also severs her ties with Irwin and then with Joan by attending her funeral. Just as Esther is trying to devise a proper ritual "for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road," she is called into a meeting of doctors who will, she hopes, authorize her release.

## **The Bell Jar: Themes**

### **Culture Clash**

Unlike most of the women who attended Smith College in 1950s, Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar* did not come from a wealthy family. That her family gets by on her mother's earnings as a typing teacher and on Esther's full-time scholarship explains why she does not normally have access to such luxuries as expensive clothes, travel, and summer homes. Hence, Esther is outside of the mainstream social circle at college and will never really fit in unless she marries into it. Aware of this, Esther makes many attempts to connect socially—she dates Buddy Willard mostly because he attends Yale; she babysits on Cape Cod to be in close proximity to wealthy people; she shops at expensive clothing stores for items on sale.

To complicate matters further, Esther comes to resent her own financial dependence on her mentor, the wealthy writer Philomena Guinea. Since Esther ultimately needs her patronage for continuing psychological care as well as for education, Esther becomes even more frustrated with her own financial dependence, although she seldom expresses this anger directly.

Yet in other ways, Esther is fairly typical of other Smith students: white, educated, attractive, and studious. That she is socially cut off from women with whom she has so much in common is one of the ironies of *The Bell Jar*.

### **Sex Roles**

Although *The Bell Jar* is partly about the impact of economics on a brilliant student with limited financial reserves, it also concerns sex roles in the 1950s. In that decade, women, generally speaking, did not attend college to ultimately support themselves; they were expected to marry eventually. In the novel, there are three women who have created real identities for themselves separate from the men in their life. The unglamorous editor Jay Cee has succeeded in that, but she has also sacrificed a certain amount of femininity to get there; the writer Philomena Guinea has thrived creatively on her own terms; Esther's psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, emerges as a caring, competent professional. However, they are exceptions in Esther's frame of reference, as well as in the male-dominated 1950s American society. More typical are wisecracking Doreen who depends on men for sex if not necessarily for marriage; traditional Betsy who patiently waits for domesticity; Dodo Conway whom Esther perceives as kind of a baby machine; and Joan Gilling whose combination of ambition and lesbianism have not made her into a happy, functional person. Even widowed Mrs. Greenwood, who earns her own money as a typing teacher, does not encourage her smart daughter to flourish: she prefers that Esther learn shorthand and eventually marry well.

Given these feminine influences, Esther channels much of her energy into men as potential husbands or as a means of losing her virginity. Nearly all of the men fall short, often because Esther resents their attempts to informally teach her something without really listening to her. Even men who are not potential lovers fancy themselves as instructors, for example, the old doctor at the sanatorium who foolishly imparts great knowledge about pilgrims. As *The Bell Jar* progresses, Esther loses most of her interest in marriage, but not in losing her virginity.

Esther also reserves much of her affection for her late father, who died when she was only nine, an event from which she has never psychologically recovered. As Lindsay Wagner-Martin wrote in *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties*, "... while it is—as she has consistently been taught—unseemly for her to be angry with her dead father, there is little stigma attached to her being angry with her living mother."

### **Search for Self**

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther searches consistently for some kind of identity but finds her options limited as a young woman with little money of her own. After a disappointing summer as a guest editor in New York City, she fails to be accepted into a prestigious writing course and gradually loses much of her sanity and ambition. She mentally explores many wild scenarios for happiness and fulfillment (e.g., apprenticing herself to a pottery maker, finding a European lover), tries to write a novel, does such bizarre things as wearing her mother's clothes and eating raw meat, and finally attempts suicide. Obviously, she is not mentally well, but to some extent society's repressions for females and the lack of creative inspiration in her life have both contributed to her collapse.

Since society does not encourage Esther to excel—her excellent grades notwithstanding—she sometimes competes in bizarre ways. For example, at a banquet for the guest interns at *Ladies' Day*, she eats ravenously as if she must consume more than any of the other interns. She also feels inferior to Buddy Willard because he lost his virginity before she did.

Esther recovers much of her mental and emotional stability by the end of the novel, but the reasons for her improvement are not entirely clear. To some extent, Dr. Nolan has empowered Esther to understand her motivations, actions, and reactions, but some would argue Esther has at least partly responded to electroconvulsive shock. At least one critic, David Holbrook in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, even questions to what extent Esther has recovered, when he writes, "All that her therapy achieves is symbolised by

the last chapter that blankets the asylum grounds ... Sylvia Plath's insight is not deceived. 'Treatment' merely freezes her." Linda Wagner-Martin disagrees: "... Esther has indeed entered a new phase . she enters her new birth ritual, the process of leaving the asylum for the real world, with as much confidence as an intelligent person can muster ... There is no question that Plath intended to create a thoroughly positive ending for Esther's narrative." While the extent of Esther's recovery is debatable, the search for her identity will certainly continue after she is released from the asylum.

### **Point of View**

Told in first-person, Esther Greenwood narrates the entire novel *The Bell Jar*. From this perspective, the reader sees guest editor Esther in the miserable summer of 1953, her selective childhood and college memories, her romantic history, her breakdown and subsequent period of institutionalization, and her road to recovery. Despite her considerable intelligence, a careful reader will not necessarily take everything she says on faith, especially in light of her history of depression and occasionally bizarre behavior. The careful reader will also take into consideration that Esther's feelings shift quite abruptly on such subjects as role models and marriage. Though the narrative generally proceeds in a straightforward, chronological fashion, occasionally jumping back and forth in time, many questions arise. Why, for example, does Esther hate her mother so much? Why does she leave her drunken friend Doreen in the hotel hallway? Why does she reduce so many people around her to unpleasant stereotypes? Above all, why is Esther so unhappy? Part of the answer can be found in the oppressive 1950s environment, but can other factors figure into it? What factors really contributed to her recovery? After observing Esther in an assortment of situations, the reader can form his or her own impressions

### **Setting**

Literally, most of *The Bell Jar* takes place in either New York City or the Boston vicinity. The time is mostly the latter half of 1953, although Esther occasionally makes reference to earlier occasions in her narration. On a figurative level, much of the novel occurs in the mind of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood.

### **Symbolism**

On the simplest level, *The Bell Jar*, Plath's only novel, refers to the social pressure for young women to marry in the 1950s. One of the causes of Esther's depression is her worry that she would not make a good wife for all of the following reasons: She cannot cook, stands too tall, and dances poorly. Unfortunately, she thinks her positive qualities—a high degree of intelligence, ambition, a literary aptitude—are actually handicaps in the marriage market. On other occasions, Esther thinks she could never be happy in any marriage, regardless of whom she finds as a husband.

*The Bell Jar* overflows with other symbolism; one of the most important is birth and rebirth. In one scene, Esther witnesses a birth in the teaching hospital where Buddy Willard works: "I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn't say a word. It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal stirrups sticking up at midair at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes...." Her continuing description of the birthing is accurate and precise, but completely lacking in any sense of joy and wonderment. As Lynda K. Bundtzen writes in *Plath's Incarnations* "The problem ... is that men have usurped the privilege of giving birth from women. The doctors are all male and they are entirely responsible for the emergence of a new creature into the world." So for Esther, a woman giving birth is no cause for celebration; it is symbolic of male oppression.

The subject of rebirth comes up figuratively in the conclusion of the novel. Note Esther's description of the elements: "The sun, emerged from its gray shrouds of clouds, shone with a summer brilliance on the untouched slopes ... I felt the profound thrill it gives me to see trees and grassland waist-high under flood water, as if the usual order of the world had shifted slightly, and entered a new phase."

Some critics have suggested that with the death of Joan Gilling, the character who most resembles Esther Greenwood, the latter is liberated from some of her pain. As Stan Smith notes in *Critical Quarterly*, "Esther is left wondering, at Joan's funeral, just what she thinks she is burying, the 'wry black image'" of her madness, or the 'beaming double of her old best self.' In a sense, the suicide of this surrogate is Esther's rebirth."

## The Bell Jar: Historical Context

### Absence of Feminism in the 1940s and 1950s

It is impossible to fully understand *The Bell Jar* without a realization of the relative absence of feminism in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Both decades were fairly prosperous ones in American history, and women's social and financial standing usually hung on their husbands' occupation and respective income. Although more than six million women went to work when America was engaged in World War II, after the war ended, many were encouraged to leave the work force. Dr. Benjamin Spock, who published the book *Baby and Child Care*, once even proposed that the federal government subsidize housewives to discourage them from entering into the work force. In *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1946), authors Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg argued that women who worked sacrificed their essential femininity. While, of course, many single women worked out of economic necessity, they were not encouraged to show naked ambition or to stay in the work force indefinitely. A married woman—with or without children—who earned as much as her husband was rare.

Of course, women who worked in menial or low-paying jobs were less of a threat to mainstream America. Hence, in *The Bell Jar*, Mrs. Greenwood encourages her daughter, Esther, to learn shorthand, because that skill will at least guarantee her some kind of job after college.

In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published. At the time, as in the 1950s, there were many more men in the work force and women earned far less money. However, this pivotal study of middle-class women's anger and some proposed solutions paved the way for a gradual redefinition of sex roles in America. In 1966, three years after Plath had taken her own life, Friedan and her colleagues established the National Organization for Women (NOW).

### Mental Illness and Suicide

*The Bell Jar* is not simply about male oppression in the 1950s; it also tackles the topic of mental illness, although it does so in non-clinical terms. Specifically, it is about one depressed and confused woman's suicide attempt at a time when the medical profession often relied on such crude methods as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). In ECT, a low electric charge is passed through a patient's body to cure such illnesses as depression and schizophrenia. Like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath received ECT.

While many factors contribute to a person's choice in taking his or her own life, researchers have found that age, sex, and marital status are all statistically significant. For example, men are more likely to kill themselves than females today, although the opposite was true at the turn of the twentieth century. By the 1960s, there was some scientific evidence that married people were less suicide-prone than single people; in turn, married people with children were not as likely to commit suicide as married or single people without children. To some extent, these statistics reflected the researcher's and society's biases. For example, *Louis Dublin wrote in Suicide: A Sociological and Statistical Study* that "the presence of children has a much greater saving effect on women than on men because the parental instinct is stronger among them." It is also important to remember that Sylvia Plath—a married (although also separated) woman with two young children—defied some of the statistical data. Finally, since there is a stigma about suicide, many families cover up the circumstances if a family member elects to take his or her own life. Hence, the official suicide statistics are not necessarily valid or reliable.

While such organizations as the National Save a Life League date back to 1906, the subject of suicide prevention remained shrouded in mystery for many American people for several decades. In 1958, the Suicide Prevention Center in Los Angeles began with a public grant from the U.S. Public Health Service. It was the first agency to use only professionals for its therapy sessions.

## The Bell Jar: Critical Overview

Two years before Sylvia Plath published *The Bell Jar*, her collection of poetry *The Colossus* opened to some good reviews, particularly in the United States. That Plath published *The Colossus* under her own name but published *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas meant the reviewers would judge the latter on its own merits. Of course, the original critics of *The Bell Jar* did note that its author was the estranged wife of Ted Hughes, who was becoming a successful poet in his own right.

Some early reviews were encouraging. Robert Taubman, in a *New Statesman* article, called *The Bell Jar* "a clever first novel ... The first feminine novel ... in the Salinger mood," referring to J. D. Salinger's famous novel *Catcher in the Rye* and some of his shorter work. Laurence Lerner in *The Listener* praised the book as "brilliant and moving," while Rupert Butler, in *Time and Tide*, found the book "terribly likeable" and "astonishingly skillful." All three critiques were published in January 1963, less than a month before Plath's suicide. By 1966, *The Bell Jar* had been published in England under Plath's real name.

Many later reviews compared *The Bell Jar* to Plath's posthumous collection of poetry, *Ariel*. C. B. Cox in a 1966 review for *Critical Quarterly* believed "the novel seems a first attempt to express mental states which eventually found a more appropriate form in poetry." However, Robert Scholes, writing for *The New York Times Book Review*, called *The Bell Jar* "a fine novel, as bitter and remorseless as her last poems." Like many other critics, he compared *The Bell Jar* to some of J. D. Salinger's work when he called the former, "the kind of book Salinger's Franny might have written about herself ten years later." (Franny is one of the fictional Glass children who appears in Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* as well as in some of his short stories.) M. L. Rosenthal wrote in the *Spectator* of the novel's "magnificent sections whose candour and revealed suffering will haunt anyone's memory."

Since its publication in 1963, *The Bell Jar* has steadily acquired a reputation as a feminist classic. In 1972, Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her *Hudson River* review, listed the ways in which the novel concerns female sexuality, "babies in glass jars, women bleeding in childbirth, Esther herself thrown in the mud by a sadist, hemorrhaging after a single sexual experience. To be a woman is to bleed and burn." Fourteen years later, Paula Bennett, in her book *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Politics*, perceived the novel as offering a brilliant evocation of "the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young women like Plath."

Although Sylvia Plath and her mother had feared publication of *The Bell Jar* in the United States would embarrass many of the author's friends and acquaintances, much of the American reaction was mature. Some critics, including Ronald De Feo and Ruth Bauerle, defended the book as more than thinly veiled autobiography. It eventually became a Book-of-the-Month club selection, and Book World considered it one of the "Fifty Notable Books" of 1971.

In light of Plath's own suicide ten years after the time *The Bell Jar* actually took place, some readers and critics have found the novel's relatively optimistic conclusion to be unconvincing. Others, disagreeing, found it to be psychologically sound. For example, Tony Tanner in *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970* believed the novel was "perhaps the most compelling and controlled account of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction."

In retrospect, it must be stressed that Esther's problems in *The Bell Jar* aren't entirely typical of female teenagers' troubles today. As Susan Sniader Lanser and Teresa De Lauretis have written, Plath's work is about one woman in a specific period of American history when exciting career opportunities for women were rare. Esther's dilemma—marriage and children versus successful career—cannot be so easily generalized today. Also, while many male and female teenagers today face the difficult decision of whether to lose their virginity before marriage, few obsess over it to the point that Esther does in *The Bell Jar*.

## The Bell Jar: Character Analysis

### Joan Gilling

A former rival for Buddy Willard's affections, Joan Gilling is eventually admitted to the same posh mental hospital where Esther is making her recovery. Although one of the novel's major characters, she materializes only toward its conclusion. Joan and Esther represent the two most complex characters in *The Bell Jar* and share many similarities. Both attend a prestigious women's college; both are intelligent, accomplished women; both come from the same hometown and went to the same church; both have suicidal tendencies. Further, both come to despise Buddy Willard for similar reasons. What distinguishes Joan and Esther most obviously is money; Joan comes from a wealthy family, whereas Esther's background is modestly middle class. Hence, Joan takes for granted many things—horseback riding, fancy clothes, private lessons—that Esther must struggle to obtain.

Although on the surface, Joan seems to represent the typical upper-class "Seven Sisters" college girl, she is really not. First, she is a physics major in college—a rather unusual choice for a woman in the 1950s. Second, she is even more nakedly ambitious than Esther and does not feign femininity in situations to please men. For example, on bike trips with Buddy Willard, she does not ask for his help ascending high hills. Third, she is not physically attractive (much to Esther's relief), and some critics have written that Joan's attraction to lesbianism can be interpreted as her realization that no man will desire her.

Like her attitude toward most of the major female characters in the novel, Esther is ambivalent toward Joan. "I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of the old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me." Esther rebuffs Joan's sexual advances, yet turns to her for help after Esther has a terrifying bleeding experience after her first sexual experience.

After Joan commits suicide by hanging, Dr. Nolan assures Esther that it is not her fault. But some critics have linked her death with Esther's recovery and rebirth. It is also ironic that Joan, with all her social status and economic advantages, destroys herself, while struggling Esther is the survivor.

### Esther Greenwood

The protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood is a young, highly intelligent college student who has a breakdown. A woman from a modestly middle-class background, but surrounded by many relatively affluent people, Esther represents on the most obvious level an individual unsure of what she wants. The central conflict concerns marriage and motherhood versus literary ambitions. Given her limited financial reserves, her choice is extremely important.

Her attitude toward the other major female characters in the novel is usually ambivalence. At various points in the novel, she sees Doreen, Betsy, Jay Cee, Joan Gilling, and many others as role models, but they all fail her expectations in different ways. Her feelings toward women shift quite abruptly. For example, soon after she wishes she "had a mother like Jay Cee," the ruthless editor has hurt her by criticizing her lack of ambition.

Sexy, uninhibited Doreen seems like a nice contrast to the bland guest editors at *Ladies' Day*, but Esther ultimately tires of her promiscuity. Betsy's niceness and virginity strikes Esther as alternatively a blessing and a curse; Joan's lesbian advances appall Esther, but Esther turns to her in a moment of a medical emergency.

The one female character that Esther is unambivalent toward is her mother, Mrs. Greenwood. "I hate her" sums up her feelings very well. Two reasons explain Esther's loathing. First, her mother discouraged Esther from mourning over her dead father; second, Esther sees her mother as a woman who sacrificed her will for her husband's career.

Esther's attitude toward the male characters in the novel seems less confused. She sees Buddy Willard, Constantin, Cal, Irwin, Eric, Marco, and others in mostly sexual terms, candidates to lose her virginity to or potential husbands. In varying degrees, they are all unsympathetic characters, ranging from the pure misogyny of Marco to Buddy Willard's smug superiority. Soon after her date with Cal, Esther loses all interest in men as potential husbands, although she still aspires to lose her virginity.

Despite her intellect, Esther is an extremely impressionable person. That, early in the novel, she lies about her own name to a virtual stranger indicates what little identity she really has. Even her surname, Greenwood, as Linda Wagner-Martin suggests, "was satisfying for reasons both personal and symbolic, and because the novel moves toward Esther's rebirth, the image of green wood is comforting." By the conclusion of *The Bell Jar*, however, Esther represents a kind of survivor, although the extent of her mental and emotional recovery is debatable. She is more confident and able to make some of her own decisions, as evidenced by her instructing Irwin to pay her emergency room bill. Her feelings toward individuals and events are less confused, more rational: she grieves at Joan's funeral, realizes Buddy Willard is "nothing, but a great amiable boredom" to her, and is understandably apprehensive about her interview with the board of physicians. Contrast this to the earlier Esther who once threw her clothes out of a New York hotel window, ate raw meat, made an unsuccessful suicide attempt, and often stared catatonically into space.

## Buddy Willard

Buddy Willard is Esther's boyfriend and a medical student. Originally, Esther enjoyed what she perceived as Buddy's lack of sexual experience ("... he made me feel I was much more sexy ..."); when she learns he was having an affair with a waitress while he was seeing her, she feels disillusioned. For Esther, it is not so much the double standard (i.e, it is okay for a man to have a fling but scandalous for a woman to do so) that upsets her; she now feels inferior to Buddy because she is a virgin and he is not.

Esther is competitive with Buddy in other ways. That he, as a doctor, can give pregnant women a drug to minimize their pain during childbirth upsets Esther. To her, the doctors—all male—are depriving the expectant women of both the trauma and beauty of the birth experience simply to achieve the ends. Hence, she imagines Buddy robbing herself of all bodily forms of pleasure.

Esther's fears aside, Buddy is a rather odious character. He seems far more interested in instructing her on such matters as medicine, science, and skiing than in learning anything from her. Joan Gilling's off-hand comment about Buddy ("He thought he knew everything. He thought he knew everything about women.") captures his feelings of superiority very well. When Esther learns Buddy has contracted tuberculosis and will need to spend a year in a sanatorium, her reaction is mostly relief that he will be gone a long time. After learning that Esther has been in a mental hospital, Buddy's reaction is "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther," implying very few men would find her desirable anymore. In light of his own long period of hospitalization for tuberculosis, the remark shows both his hypocrisy and insensitivity.

## Other Characters

### **Betsy**

One of the guest interns at *Ladies' Day*, Betsy represents the ultimate "nice girl": an All-American girl from Kansas who will wait patiently for a husband, a big farm, and plenty of children—without losing her virginity before marriage. In *The Bell Jar*, Betsy attempts to keep Esther away from Doreen's vampish influence, and for a while Esther seems receptive. Ultimately, however, Esther cannot accept the simple naivete of Betsy, whom she comes to see as the "Pollyanna Cowgirl."

### **Cal**

Esther's date at the beach. Like many of the men in the novel, Cal attempts to teach Esther something, in his case, the methods of suicide.

### **Constantin**

A translator at the United Nations. Originally, Esther attempts to get him to seduce her. Unfortunately, when they actually go to bed, he simply falls asleep beside her. In the novel, he is treated as one more member of the patriarchy that ultimately disappoints Esther.

### **Dodo Conway**

To Esther, the model of fertility: a pregnant mother who already has six children. Although it is implied that Dodo is less than an ideal mother, she is greatly admired in Esther's neighborhood simply for having so many children.

### **Dee Dee**

A patient at the mental asylum where Esther is staying. One of the few females in the novel to demonstrate creativity, she composes a tune on the piano, about which "everybody kept saying she ought to get it published, it would be a hit."

### **Doreen**

One of the guest editors at *Ladies' Day*, Doreen represents "the bad girl" among the group: sexy, vulgar, bored. She serves as a counterpoint to traditional "nice girl" Betsy, and Esther alternately envies both of the girls for their solid identities. Although sophisticated with Esther, Doreen dissolves into a passive sex object with the cowboy disk jockey, Lenny. After Doreen parties too much and passes out in her own vomit, Esther further distances herself from her.

### **Elaine**

See Esther Greenwood.

### **Eric**

Esther's friend at college. Esther considers him a probable candidate for abandoning her virginity until he says she reminds him of an older sister.

### **Dr. Gordon**

He is the first psychiatrist to examine Esther after her breakdown. Showing little understanding or concern for her, he administers her electroconvulsive shock treatments without getting a second opinion. He then goes on vacation, referring her to a colleague. Dr. Gordon represents the respectable but artificial side of the medical profession.

### **Mrs. Greenwood**

Esther Greenwood's widowed mother, Mrs. Greenwood appears periodically throughout the narrative.

Although she seldom articulates it, Esther harbors great hostility toward her mother, as evidenced in the following passage: "I had always been my father's favorite, and it seemed fitting that I should take on a mourning my mother had never bothered with." A teacher of secretarial students, Mrs. Greenwood wants her daughter to learn shorthand so she will have a job after college. She does little to encourage Esther's literary aspirations. For example, after Esther returns from New York City to move back with her mother, Mrs. Greenwood unsympathetically passes on this bad news: "I think I should tell you right away, you didn't make the writing course."

### **Philomena Guinea**

A famous and successful writer, she is also the woman who sponsors Esther's scholarship. She agrees to subsidize Esther's stay at a posh psychiatric hospital as soon as she learns Esther is not pregnant.

### **Elly Higginbottom**

See Esther Greenwood.

### **Hilda**

Like Esther, she is a guest editor at *Ladies' Day*. A designer of hats and other accessories, she demonstrates no curiosity or any positive emotion in the brief period that Esther spends with her.

### **Irwin**

The man to whom Esther loses her virginity. Described by Esther as "rather ugly and bespectacled," she does not have romantic feelings for him and is simply tired of being a virgin.

### **Jay Cee**

Esther's boss at *Ladies' Day*, Jay Cee is an unglamorous, savvy editor, something of a rarity in a profession dominated by men in the 1950s. Although perceived by the summer interns as intimidating, Jay Cee does show some genuine concern for Esther by directly asking what her future plans are and by making suggestions. Esther's attitude toward her is ambivalent. While she admires Jay Cee's intelligence and claims indifference to her unattractive appearance, Esther also feels Jay Cee and some other women "wanted to teach me something ... but I didn't think they had anything to teach me."

### **Marco**

Accurately described by Esther as a "woman-hater," Marco sees women in one of two categories: Madonnas or whores. On his date with Esther, he admits to being in love with his first cousin, who intends to become a nun. Treating Esther like a whore, he gives her a diamond stickpin, throws her in a muddy ditch, and threatens to rape her.

### **Dr. Nolan**

One of the few positive characters in the novel, Dr. Nolan is a direct yet humane psychiatrist—the opposite of Dr. Gordon—who empowers Esther after her breakdown. Through Dr. Nolan's influence, Esther comes to understand her own motivations and reconciles with her anger. Not judgmental, she empowers Esther by not criticizing or analyzing her statement toward her mother: "I hate her." When Joan Gilling commits suicide, Dr. Nolan assures Esther that it is no one's fault, certainly not Esther's. Dr. Nolan is also the first person Esther sees after her electroconvulsive shock treatments and the person who coaches her back into reality.

### **Mrs. Savage**

One of the patients at the mental asylum where Esther is staying. She is a rich, idle woman who has apparently committed herself to shame her family.

### **Lenny Shepherd**

An unscrupulous disk jockey who becomes sexually involved with Doreen and unconsciously intimidates

Esther. In observing Doreen and Lenny, Esther becomes less impressed with Doreen as a role model.

### **Valerie**

A lobotomized patient whom Esther meets at the mental asylum.

### **Mr. Willard**

The father of Buddy Willard. Not as pretentious as his son, he is nonetheless in the novel to represent the patriarchy of the 1950s.

### **Mrs. Willard**

The mother of Esther's boyfriend, Buddy Willard. A woman who has decided to live her life through her husband, she serves mostly as a negative role model for Esther.

## **The Bell Jar: Essays and Criticism**

### **Lack of Choices in 1950**

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) was first published in England under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, a few weeks before Plath's suicide. It was published under her own name in England in 1966, and not published in the United States until 1971. Much of the novel is based on Plath's life. Her father died when she was eight-years-old and at that time her family moved to Wellesley, Massachusetts, outside Boston. She attended Smith College, and during the summer of 1953 worked at *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York. Later that summer Plath suffered from depression, underwent electroconvulsive therapy, attempted suicide, and was subsequently hospitalized. However much the events of *The Bell Jar* parallel those of Plath's real life, the novel remains a fictionalized autobiography. Plath herself called it a "potboiler," acknowledging that she had employed the techniques of a fiction writer in order to achieve a certain effect and to favor particular interpretations of the events depicted. Rather than read *The Bell Jar* in terms of the author's biography, we might read it in one of two other ways, as a kind of biography of American culture in the 1950s or as a record of the uses of literature, especially poetry.

One of the most common interpretations of the novel sees Esther Greenwood's life as an example of the difficult position of educated women in America in the 1950s. In her introduction to *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, Linda Wagner notes that *The Bell Jar* represents the "cultural alienation—and the resulting frustration—of talented women" at that time. Esther struggles with the combined rewards and stigmas of excelling in school, but she is not without humor. "I hated coming downstairs sweaty-handed and curious every Saturday night and having some senior introduce me to her aunt's best friend's son and finding some pale, mushroomy fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg. I didn't think I deserved it. After all, I wasn't crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn't know when to stop."

Esther's intellectualism seems to be a disability to some people, perhaps including Esther herself. She benefits from the prestige associated with regularly dating Buddy Willard and she is much relieved when, just as she considers breaking up with him, he contracts tuberculosis: "I simply told everyone that Buddy had TB and we were practically engaged, and when I stayed in to study on Saturday nights they were extremely kind to me because they thought I was so brave, working the way I did just to hide a broken heart." Diligent study is a substitute for romance, suggesting that the two cannot exist together.

By the same token, marriage and a career appear incompatible to Esther, "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brain-washed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." It

is this incompatibility which she sarcastically equates with a psychological disorder. "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days." Even though Esther insists throughout the novel that she intends never to marry, she seems unable to eliminate it altogether as a possibility. She feels hurt by the photograph on Dr. Gordon's desk, by the "hairy, ape-shaped law student from Yale" who tells her she'll be a prude at forty, and by Buddy when he visits her at the psychiatric hospital and wonders who she'll marry now. To Esther's mind, all of these men seem to mock her unmarriageability.

Esther's dissatisfactions may be typical of well-educated American women of her generation. Yet, Esther does not imagine herself as part of a community of women who suffer in the same way. Even in the psychiatric hospital, she distinguishes herself from the other women there. Esther is repulsed by Valerie, who has had part of her brain removed, and intrigued by Miss Norns, the mute, unresponsive patient. She is suspicious of the society women ten years her senior, like Dee Dee and Mrs. Savage who trade private jokes about their husbands. Joan is "the beaming double of a person Esther used to be but from whom she is now estranged. Where Esther is uneasy, Joan "seemed perfectly at home among these women." When Joan later makes a rather tame romantic overture to her, Esther recoils and literally distances herself from Joan by walking out of the room.

Esther's tendency to identify herself in contrast to these other women indicates that this is not a "feminist manifesto," as some critics have claimed it to be. Still, she is clearly affected by a conflict between her ambitions and received roles for women. This conflict is evident in her desire for sexual experience on the one hand and, on the other, a pragmatic understanding of the advantages of chastity. When she gains access to birth control, Esther proudly reflects, "I was my own woman."

Whether or not they view *The Bell Jar* as a true personal or cultural history, many critics have demonstrated the advantages of reading Plath's poetry alongside her novel. Plath was and is known primarily as a poet, though only one of her several poetry collections was published while she was alive. (All of her poems are included in *Collected Poems* (1981), for which Plath posthumously received the Pulitzer Prize.) Reading her novel in terms of poetry shows the importance of poetry as a guiding force in the plot and in the structure of the text.

Esther Greenwood is not yet a poet, and seems to be less well-read than her creator, Sylvia Plath. When Buddy Willard mentions that he has recently discovered the work of a doctor-poet and of a "famous dead Russian short-story writer who had been a doctor too," Esther does not recognize them as William Carlos Williams and Anton Chekhov. She is hardly ignorant, even though she fears others will think her so. For instance, she compares her elite college's liberal requirements for the English major to the stricter traditional requirements of the city college where her mother teaches. Esther worries that "the stupidest person at my mother's college knew more than I did "

Nevertheless, Plath grants to Esther a strong poetic sensibility. For example, though she likes botany, she resists physics for its irreverent attitude toward language: "What I couldn't stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers. Instead of leaf shapes and enlarged diagrams of the holes the leaves breathe through and fascinating words like carotene and xanthophyll on the blackboard, there were these hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas in Mr. Manzi's special red chalk." These monstrous forms of words do injury to the great possibilities of language and they appear to bleed on the chalkboard. While the physics professor scratches the board with his formulas, Esther places herself at a safe distance and writes "page after page of villanelles and sonnets." It may be that Esther opposes learning shorthand not only because she sees it as a stereotypically female skill, but because its characters are, like physics formulas, shrunken parodies of poetic language.

Esther shields herself against the pressures she feels with her belief that poetry possesses a special value. One of those pressures is the supposed impracticality of a career as a poet: Buddy Willard claims that a poem is simply "a piece of dust." But Esther silently believes that "People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick and couldn't sleep."

She imagines that poetry can work as a kind of temporary cure for emotional distress. However, as her depression worsens, Esther has less and less access to this potential remedy. She envies the unimaginative work of a U.N. translator: "I wished with all my heart I could crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another. It mightn't make me any happier, but it would be one more little pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles." Her mother explains to Philomena Guinea that Esther's fear of never writing again is the cause of her illness. But if her writing is the cause, it is not part of the cure. Esther makes no mention of writing or of literature during her stay in the psychiatric ward. The first person Esther encounters at the private hospital is Valerie, who is reading *Vogue*. Other than magazines, the only texts she mentions are Joan's physics books, and the nurses quickly remove them.

Though poetry disappears from the story (or the thematic level) of the text, it may remain concealed in the novel's structure. The plot organization of *The Bell Jar* has been described as episodic, that is, as consisting of associated episodes or scenes. We might also call the structure of the novel "stanzaic," or organized like the stanzas or paragraphs of a poem. The last chapter, for example, is divided into six sections depicting six different kinds of farewells. Her encounters with Dr. Nolan, Valerie, Buddy, Irwm, Joan, and the doctors' board are variations on the theme of departure. These interrelated scenes reinforce the difficulty and the importance of leave-taking for Esther. Together they compose a kind of poem, the final word on her experiences of the previous months.

The story ends suspended at this significant moment before Esther exits the hospital. In the last scene we see her enter the conference room, guided inside by the "eyes and faces" of the doctors gathered there. These points of reference may symbolize stars, which can also provide direction and guidance. Plath uses a star metaphor in the introduction she wrote as Guest Managing Editor of the August 1953 college issue of *Mademoiselle*, "We're stargazers this season ... From our favorite fields, stars of the first magnitude shed a bright influence on our plans for jobs and futures. Although horoscopes for our ultimate orbits aren't yet in, we Guest Eds. are counting on a favorable forecast with this send-off from *Mlle.*, the star of the campus."

Despite Plath's rather syrupy language, her metaphor connects stars and her future literary career. In a late poem called "Words" (1963), Plath more directly compares words to stars:

Years later I  
Encounter them on the road—  
Words dry and riderless,  
The indefatigable hooftaps.  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.

Plath suggests that poetry's words can lose some of their flavor and become dry, or run wild like horses without riders. Although the poet cannot control the words as she would like, the stars reflected in a pool of water provide some order and direction for her life. But while the stars are her guide, they remain "fixed" and silent at the bottom of a pool. By contrast, words tirelessly and noisily trot over the earth. Both words and stars can direct the poet to a certain extent, but neither is entirely reliable. The poet of "Words" and Esther Greenwood are not identical people. Yet they both are drawn to the language of poetry in order to define themselves. And both discover that there are times when even poetic words fail them.

Source: Jeanmne Johnson, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale 1997.  
Johnson is a doctoral candidate at Yale University.

## Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman

One of the most misunderstood of contemporary novels, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is in structure and intent a highly conventional bildungsroman. Concerned almost entirely with the education and maturation of Esther Greenwood, Plath's novel uses a chronological and necessarily episodic structure to keep Esther at the center of all action. Other characters are fragmentary, subordinate to Esther and her developing consciousness, and are shown only through their effects on her as central character. No incident is included which does not influence her maturation, and the most important formative incidents occur in the city, New York. As Jerome Buckley describes the bildungsroman in his 1974 *Season of Youth*, its principal elements are "a growing up and gradual self-discovery," "alienation," "provinciality, the larger society," "the conflict of generations," "ordeal by love" and "the search for a vocation and a working philosophy."

Plath signals the important change of location at the opening of *The Bell Jar*. "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York ... New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-gray at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat." Displaced, misled by the morning freshness, Greenwood describes a sterile, inimical setting for her descent into, and exploration of, a hell both personal and communal. Readers [such as Denis Donoghue in "You could say she had a calling for Death," Saul Maloff in "Waiting for the Voice to Crack," and Charles Molesworth in "Again, Sylvia Plath"] have often stressed the analogy between Greenwood and the Rosenbergs—and sometimes lamented the inappropriateness of Plath's comparing her personal angst with their actual execution—but in this opening description, the Rosenberg execution is just one of the threatening elements present in the New York context. It is symptomatic of the "foreign" country's hostility, shown in a myriad of ways throughout the novel.

In *The Bell Jar*, as in the traditional bildungsroman, the character's escape to a city images the opportunity to find self as well as truths about life. Such characters as Pip, Paul Morel, and Jude Fawley idealize the city as a center of learning and experience, and think that once they have relocated themselves, their lives will change dramatically. As Buckley points out, however, the city is often ambivalent: "the city, which seems to promise infinite variety and newness, all too often brings a disenchantment more alarming and decisive than any dissatisfaction with the narrowness of provincial life." For Esther Greenwood, quiet Smith student almost delirious with the opportunity to go to New York and work for *Mademoiselle* for a month, the disappointment of her New York experience is cataclysmic. Rather than shape her life, it nearly ends it; and Plath structures the novel to show the process of disenchantment in rapid acceleration.

The novel opens in the midst of Greenwood's month in New York, although she tells the story in flashbacks; and for the first half of the book—ten of its twenty chapters—attention remains there, or on past experiences that are germane to the New York experiences. Greenwood recounts living with the other eleven girls on the *Mademoiselle* board at the Amazon Hotel, doing assignments for the tough fiction editor Jay Cee, going to lunches and dances, buying clothes, dating men very unlike the fellows she had known at college, and sorting through lifestyles like Doreen's which shock, bewilder, and yet fascinate her. Events as predictably mundane as these are hardly the stuff of exciting fiction but Plath has given them an unexpected drama because of the order in which they appear. *The Bell Jar* is plotted to establish two primary themes: that of Greenwood's developing identity, or lack of it; and that of her battle against submission to the authority of both older people and, more pertinently, of men. The second theme is sometimes absorbed by the first but Plath uses enough imagery of sexual conquest that it comes to have an almost equal importance. For a woman of the 1950s,

finding an identity other than that of sweetheart, girlfriend, and wife and mother was a major achievement.

Greenwood's search for identity is described through a series of episodes that involve possible role models. Doreen, the Southern woman whose rebelliousness fascinates Esther, knows exactly what she will do with her time in New York. The first scene in the novel is Doreen's finding the macho Lenny Shepherd, disc jockey and playboy par excellence. Attracted by Doreen's "decadence," Esther goes along with the pair until the sexual jitterbug scene ends with Doreen's melon-like breasts flying out of her dress after she has bitten Lenny's ear lobe. Esther has called herself Elly Higginbottom in this scene, knowing instinctively that she wants to be protected from the kind of knowledge Doreen has. Plath describes Esther as a photo negative, a small black dot, a hole in the ground; and when she walks the 48 blocks home to the Amazon in panic, she sees no one recognizable in the mirror. Some Chinese woman, she thinks, "wrinkled and used up," and, later, "the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury." Purging herself in a hot bath, Greenwood temporarily escapes her own consciousness: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure." Unfortunately, when Doreen pounds on her door later that night, drunk and sick, Esther has to return to the real world. Her revulsion is imaged in Doreen's uncontrollable vomit.

The second "story" of the New York experience is the ptomaine poisoning of all the girls except Doreen after the *Ladies' Day* magazine luncheon. Plath's vignette of Jay Cee is imbedded in this account; the editor's great disappointment in Greenwood (because she has no motivation, no direction) serves to make Esther more depressed. As she comes near death from the poisoning, she also assesses the female role models available to her: her own mother, who urges her to learn shorthand; the older writer Philomena Guinea, who has befriended her but prescriptively; and Jay Cee, by now an admonitory figure. Although Esther feels purged and holy and ready for a new life after her ordeal, she cannot rid herself of the feeling of betrayal. No sooner had she realized Jay Cee ("I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do") than she had disappointed her. The development of the novel itself illustrates the kind of irony Esther had employed in the preface, with the lament:

I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America...

Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.

Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself.

Plath's handling of these early episodes makes clear Greenwood's very real confusion about her direction. As Buckley has pointed out, the apparent conflict with parent or location in the bildungsroman is secondary to the real conflict, which remains "personal in origin; the problem lies with the hero himself (or herself).

Esther Greenwood's struggle to know herself, to be self-motivated, to become a writer as she has always dreamed is effectively presented through Plath's comparatively fragmented structure. As Patricia Meyer Spacks writes in 1981 [in *The Adolescent Idea, Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination*] about literature of the adolescent, the adolescent character has no self to discover. The process is not one of discovering a persona already there but rather creating a persona. Unlike Esther, then, perhaps we should not be disturbed that the face in her mirror is mutable. We must recognize with sympathy, however, that she carries the weight of having to maintain a number of often conflicting identities—the obliging daughter and the ungrateful woman, the successful writer and the immature student, the virginal girlfriend and the worldly lover. In its structure, *The Bell Jar* shows how closely these strands are interwoven.

Source: Linda W. Wagner, "Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman," in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 12, No 1, February, 1986, pp. 55-68.

## Waiting for the Voice to Crack

Apparent reasons for the eight-year delay in importing *The Bell Jar* from England (publication there, 1963) are not in themselves convincing. The pseudonym of Victoria Lucas was a hedge, but against what? Sylvia Plath made no secret of her authorship. Her suicide followed publication by a month, but such things have never stopped the wheels of industry from turning. She was a "property" after all, certainly following the publication of *Ariel* in 1966. Nor can we take seriously her having referred to it as a "potboiler" and therefore to be kept separate from her serious work: the oldest and most transparent of all writers' dodges. All the evidence argues against it. As early as 1957 she had written a draft of the novel; she completed the final version on a Eugene Saxton Fund fellowship and felt toward its terms an urgent sense of commitment and obligation; the painstaking quality of the writing—but above all, its subject: her own pain and sickness, treated with literal fidelity, a journal done up as a novel, manifestly re-experienced, and not from any great distance of glowing health. One of her motives was the familiar one of getting her own back, to (as her heroine says) "fix a lot of people"—among others of smaller significance, to lay the ghost of her father, and tell the world she hated her mother (the exact words of her protagonist-surrogate, spoken to her psychiatrist in a key passage).

Only the names were changed, nothing else as much as a novel can be, it was recorded rather than imagined. Evidently she panicked as publication drew near and displayed more than the usual terror of reviewers, who were on the whole generous and patronizing in a chuckling avuncular way, though she misread their intention, as toward the end, one supposes, she misread everything. Her last awful year was marked by a miscarriage, an appendectomy, the birth of her second child, as well as a series of plaguing minor illnesses, to say nothing of separation from her husband. According to her mother, Mrs. Aurelia Plath, whose 1970 letter to her daughter's Harper & Row editor is included in a "Biographical Note" appended to the novel, Miss Plath told her brother that the book must in no circumstances be published in the U.S.

Mrs. Plath's letter is a noteworthy document, and an oddly touching one. She pleads her case by telling the editor she knows no pleas will help, though publication here will cause "suffering" in the lives of several persons whom Sylvia loved and who had "given freely of time, thought, affection, and in one case, financial help during those agonizing six months of breakdown in 1953." To them, the book as it stands in itself "represents the basest ingratitude." But, Mrs. Plath argues, her daughter didn't mean for the book to stand alone, she herself told her mother in 1962 that she'd merely "thrown together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color," a "potboiler" to show "how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown ... to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar." Her second novel, she assured her mother, "will show that same world as seen through the eyes of health." Ingratitude was "not the basis of Sylvia's personality"; the second novel, presumably, would have been one long, ingratiating, fictionalized thank you note to the world. Of course the publisher is right to publish; but since the persons who may be slightly scorched are still alive, why eight years?

The novel itself is no firebrand. It's a slight, charming, sometimes funny and mildly witty, at moments tolerably harrowing "first" novel, just the sort of clever book a Smith summa cum laude (which she was) might have written if she weren't given to literary airs. From the beginning our expectations of scandal and startling revelation are disappointed by a modesty of scale and ambition and a jaunty temperateness of tone. The voice is straight out of the 1950's: politely disenchanted, wholesome, yes, wholesome, but never cloying, immediately attractive, nicely confused by it all, incorrigibly truth-telling; in short, the kind of kid we liked then, the best product of our best schools. The hand of Salinger lay heavy on her.

But this is 1971 and we read her analyst, too wily to be deceived by that decent, smiling, well-scrubbed coed who so wants to be liked and admired. We look for the slips and wait for the voice to crack. We want the bad, the worst news; that's what we're here for, to be made happy by horror, not to be amused by girlish chatter. Our interests are clinical and prurient. A hard case, she confounds us. She never raises her voice. To control it, she stays very close to the line of her life in her twentieth year, telling rather than evoking the memorable events; more bemused than aghast. That year she came down to New York from Smith one summer month to work as an apprentice editor for *Mademoiselle* (here *Ladies Day*) for its college issue, a reward for being a good, straight-A girl and promising young writer; and had exactly the prescribed kind of time, meeting people and going places, eating out and dressing up, shopping and sightseeing, and thinking maybe it was about time she got laid. The closest she came to it was sleeping chastely, quite dressed and untouched, beside an inscrutable UN simultaneous translator. Throughout, the tone is prevailingly unruffled, matter-of-fact, humorously woebegone.

Prevailingly, but not quite. What should have been exciting—she was a small-town girl living in NYC for the first time on her own—was dreary, trivial, flat. She was beginning to doubt herself, her talent, her prospects. Mysteriously, as if from another work, period of life, region of the mind, images and memories startlingly appear, and just as quickly vanish; colors and events we recognize from the late poems: darkness and blackness; the world perceived as misshapen and ominous; her father (the figure of her marvelous poem "Daddy") remembered with love and fury, the source of her last "pure" happiness at the age of nine before he perversely left her bereft one day by cruelly dying; fetuses and blood, fever and sickness, the obsession with purity and the grotesque burden of her body of feeling itself. In the poems the pressure is terrific; she screams her pain, in a final effort to contain it; yet here it is duly noted, set down serially, linearly, as possibly interesting to those in the business of making connections, scrupulously recorded as in a printed clinical questionnaire by a straight-A girl in the habit of carefully completing forms. When she sees the dumb, staring "goggle-eyed head lines" monstrously proclaiming the execution of the Rosenbergs, she "couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along the nerves" and concludes flatly, "I thought it must be the worst thing in the world." A silent china-white telephone sits like a "death's head." Her hometown boyfriend, a medical student, takes her to see cadavers at the morgue and a foetus with a "little piggy smile" that reminds her of Eisenhower; and then, to round things off, they go to watch a child-birth. The woman on the "awful torture-table, with these metal stirrups sticking up in midair" seems to her "to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups" and "all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman wooing noise" and "all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again." A silly simpering girl, a hat-designer idiotically pleased at the good news of the Rosenbergs' execution, reveals a "dybbuk" beneath her plump, bland exterior. But these darker notes do not accumulate to thematic density save in retrospect; they seem accidental dissonances, slips of the tongue.

Even the breakdown, when it comes, is generally muted, seeming from the outside as much slothfulness as madness, the obligatory junior-year interlude. The break is quantitative: tones are darker, the world somewhat more distorted and remote, the voice, almost never breezy now, is more than disaffected—it can become nasty, a trifle bitchy, even cruel, streaked with violence. She makes some gestures toward suicide—as much amusing as they are frightening; and then though she very nearly brings it off, we almost can't bring ourselves to believe it, so theatrically staged is the scene. Yet even then, after breakdown and hospitalization, electroshock and insulin, she composes the book's funniest, most charming scene—of her incidental, much-delayed defloration; and in the knowledge of its appalling consequences. The chap, accidentally encountered on the steps of the Widener (where else?) is, she carefully notes, a 26-year-old full professor of Mathematics at Harvard, name of Irwin; and ugly. Him she elects to "seduce"; and after the fastest such episode in fiction, she isn't even sure it happened at all. Wanting more direct evidence, she can only infer it from her massive hemorrhaging. Concluding now that, no longer a virgin, she has put behind her childish things, she lies down and, bleeding profusely, writes: "I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition." At the end, the tone is ambiguous but not despairing, she has been readmitted to Smith, where out of old habit she will keep getting

nothing but A's; the bell jar has descended once, and may again.

She laid out the elements of her life, one after the other, and left to the late poems the necessary work of imagining and creating it. It is for this reason that we feel in the book an absence of weight and complexity sufficient to the subject.

On balance, *The Bell Jar*, good as it is, must be counted part of Sylvia Plath's juvenilia, along with most of the poems of her first volume; though in the novel as in a few of the early poems she foretells the last voice she was ever to command.

Source: Saul Maloff, "Waiting for the Voice to Crack," in *The New Republic*, Vol. 164, No. 2941, May 8, 1971, pp. 33-35.

## The Bell Jar: Compare and Contrast

**1950s and 1960s:** As recently as 1950, men received approximately 76 percent of all degrees conferred in the United States. At the Master's level, men received roughly 2.5 times as many degrees as women.

**Today:** In 1993, men received approximately 46 percent of all degrees conferred in the United States. Since 1986, women began receiving more Master's degrees than men, and the pattern continues.

**1950s and 1960s:** In 1960, about 59 percent of single women were part of the American work force, about 32 percent of married women belonged to the work force, and about 42 percent of "other" (widowed, divorced, separated) women belonged to the work force.

**Today:** In 1994, About 68 percent of single women were part of the American work force, about 61 percent of married women belonged to the work force, and about 48 percent of "other" (widowed, divorced, separated) women belonged to the work force.

**1950s and 1960s:** The concept of date rape did not exist; if a woman went on a date with a man and was raped, she did not have any legal recourse.

**Today:** Many more women are successfully suing men for date rape.

**1950s and 1960s:** National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) on suicide in America can never be entirely accurate or reliable, as many people who attempt or commit suicide often conceal their intention. Their families often conceal the suicide, too. However, NCHS statistics on suicides in 1953 reveal that men were more than three times as likely to commit suicide as women. White men in 1953 were more likely to commit suicide than any other racial/gender group; the second most likely group was non-white men; the third most likely group was white women; the least likely group was non-white women.

**Today:** As of 1993, the racial/gender breakdown of 1953 had not changed; however, men are now about four times more likely to commit suicide than women.

## The Bell Jar: Topics for Further Study

Explore some of the current career opportunities for females that did not exist in the 1950s.

What are some of the circumstances that might lead a person to consider suicide? What are some indications that a person may be contemplating suicide? What can you do to intervene? Investigate the debate

surrounding assisted suicide and argue one position.

If a bright young person comes from a family without much money, how can that person improve his or her chances of obtaining a higher education? Is it better for that person to work full-time and put off college for a while or to work part-time and study part-time? Back up your opinion with some solid research.

## The Bell Jar: Media Adaptations

The movie *The Bell Jar*, based on Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel of the same name, was directed by Larry Peerce and starred Marilyn Hassett, Julie Harris, Anne Jackson, and Barbara Barrie. Released by Avco Embassy in 1979, it was neither a critical nor commercial success, in large part because the script does not examine the reasons for Esther Greenwood's depression and mental breakdown.

## The Bell Jar: What Do I Read Next?

Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, published in 1987, provides a balanced portrait of the writer, examining both her depression and talent.

J.D. Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1953, examines the troubled adolescence of Holden Caulfield and the phoniness he detects in most adults.

Sylvia Plath's collection of poetry, *Ariel*, was published posthumously in 1965 and contains some of Plath's most haunting work. With the publication of these poems written toward the end of Plath's short life, the author soon acquired a cult-like reputation.

Eileen Aird's *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work*, published in 1973, is a good book for students unfamiliar with Plath's poetry and reputation.

*The Colossus* (1960), Sylvia Plath's only collection of poetry published during her lifetime, has many of her poems written in the 1950s.

Sylvia Plath's *The Collected Poems*, published in 1981, includes all of Plath's verse, including many formerly unpublished pieces. It won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1982.

## The Bell Jar: Bibliography and Further Reading

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Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties*, Twayne, 1992.

### **For Further Study**

Paul Alexander, editor, *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*, Harper, 1985.

One of the first anthologies of critical essays on Plath which, overall, focus more on her literary accomplishments than on the details of her life.

Ruth Bauerle, "Plath, at Last," in *Plain Dealer*, April 25, 1971, p. H7.

Argues that the novel is more than an autobiographical success.

Elaine Connell, *Sylvia Plath: Killing the Angel in the House*, Pennine Pens, 1993.

A brief but competent guide to Plath's biography and her critical history, combined with some uncomplicated interpretations of Plath's works, including *The Bell Jar*.

Ronald De Feo, review in *Modern Occasions*, Fall, 1971, pp. 624-25.

Published shortly after the novel was published in the United States, this critique perceives the novel as more than a cult classic, praising it for qualities unrelated to its autobiographical elements.

Teresa De Lauretis, "Rebirth in the Bell Jar," in *Women's Studies*, 3 (1975), pp. 173-83.

Article suggests *The Bell Jar* must be viewed in terms of a historical perspective.