



## The Bell Jar Sylvia Plath

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# Introduction

*The Bell Jar* was 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 overachieving 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.

# Author 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.

# Plot 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 Con-stantin, 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 undipped 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 bom twice--patched, retreaded and approved for the road," she is called into a meeting of doctors who will, she hopes, authorize her release.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

It's the summer the Rosenbergs were electrocuted and the narrator of this story is in New York City. She can't get the Rosenbergs out of her mind and thinks a lot about what it must be like to be electrocuted. Worse, the narrator doesn't like New York. She is from New England and this is her first time in the big city. She and 11 other girls have won a fashion magazine contest. They wrote essays, stories, poems and fashion blurbs to compete for jobs in New York, for a month with all expenses paid and many free bonuses like hair styling at expensive salons. They are meeting successful people in their own fields.

The narrator realizes that there's something wrong with her. She can't stop thinking about the Rosenbergs even when she tries and nothing interests her: not the expensive clothes she has been able to buy with the money from the scholarship or her many successes at college this past year. There are parties and what should be the excitement of being in the city, but none of it stirs her. "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo," she writes, some years after the fact. She says that she still has the makeup kits and the other free gifts, which she didn't use at the time but which she takes out and occasionally uses now.

The girls are staying at a women-only hotel, the Amazon; the other girls come from wealthy families and are students at expensive secretarial schools. They make the narrator sick, but she admits that it's because she is jealous of them.

Her best friend is Doreen, who is like no one she has ever known before. She is from a Southern girls' college and is cynical about everything, particularly the other girls and the narrator's commitment to her job. The narrator is working for an editor named Jay Cee, purportedly the best editor of an intellectual fashion magazine in the country. Jay

Cee has taken an interest in her and is trying to help her make her month in New York a valuable learning experience.

All the girls are going to a party and, as usual, the narrator and Doreen separate themselves from the others and take a cab together. While the cab is stopped in traffic, they are picked up on the way by two men: a disk jockey named Lenny Shepherd and his friend, Frankie. Lenny takes to Doreen immediately, leaving the narrator with Frankie, whom she very much dislikes. They go to a bar and order drinks. The narrator, who has given the men a false name, Elly Higginbottom, is not adept at ordering drinks but orders a vodka straight up. She finds that she likes the way it makes her feel. Frankie departs and Lenny invites them to his place.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, convicted of spying against the United States were executed in 1953. The dramatic effect of this event on the story's narrator sets the stage for her slide into mental illness. It also delineates in time the story's setting.

Point of view in *The Bell Jar* is remarkable because the story is autobiography, thinly disguised as fiction. The term *roman à clef* is used to apply to a novel that features real persons or actual events under disguise. Sylvia Plath did suffer from mental illness and its onset was at about the same time in her life as it occurs in the narrator's life. Plath was a very talented writer, making her name at a very early age with her remarkably evocative and original poetry. She published her first poem when she was eight years old.

The revelation of the story through a narrator who is so thoroughly omniscient about her own thoughts, reactions and perceptions gives it startling impact. Reading *The Bell Jar* is a disturbing journey into the mind of one who is becoming mentally ill and the effect is greatly enhanced by this writer's ability to describe not only her feelings but also what she sees or thinks she sees.

When she is going through a paranoid phase, the description is jolting. When she is convinced that everyone in the room is looking at her and talking about her, we know that they are hardly aware of her presence. Journeying with a superbly talented poet through the emotionally wrenching effects of mental illness is extraordinarily enlightening. This is not the first story ever written about mental illness, but it may be the most revealing, heart-rending and memorable. It's impossible to read this book and then go away and forget about it. It's truly a journey into a world that most of us know little or nothing about.

The narrator's reactions and behaviors in this first chapter cannot be understood without knowing that she is losing her grip on reality. Paranoia is driving her when she gives a false name lest these strangers know more about her than she wants them to know. She likes Doreen and likes to be with her, but beyond that friendship, there is very little that is interesting to her. For someone who is not adept at ordering drinks (which would suggest that she doesn't drink very much), straight vodka, particularly as much as we see her downing in this chapter and the next, should render her immobile, but it doesn't.

Another aspect of this writer's skill is her use of humor. Her narratives and comments are quirky and funny. The humor adds an often delicious edge to this very serious and sometimes very frightening tale.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Lenny has constructed a ranch house inside a New York apartment. "Elly" has had too much to drink and Lenny and Doreen are absorbed in each other. Doreen has slipped right into calling her by her made-up name instead of her real name, Esther. She doesn't blow Esther's cover. Esther watches Doreen and Lenny dance and as the relationship heats up, she decides she doesn't want to see any more and leaves. She is tipsy, but she takes out her New York City map and figures out how to get back to their hotel. She walks the 48 blocks alone and by the time she gets to her room, she is sober.

She feels very alone. "The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence." She thinks about who could call her, who has her phone number, but the only person she can think of is Buddy Willard's mother, who wants her to meet with a simultaneous interpreter at the United Nations. Buddy is her boyfriend and is in a tuberculosis sanatorium. He and his mother had hoped she could work at the sanatorium this summer instead of going to New York City, but she chose otherwise. She takes a hot bath, which she customarily does when she's depressed or wants to think; it seems to purify her.

She is asleep in bed when she is awakened by someone calling, "Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in." It's Doreen, who is very intoxicated, and she is slumped against the door. She lies down just outside the door and then vomits. "Elly" just closes the door and goes back to bed.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

The conflicts in this story are internal; they are within the protagonist/narrator. Mental illness is trying to take over and our heroine is not only struggling against it, but is

trying to use her mind to understand what is going on. We find out in the course of the story that the protagonist is a very intelligent, overachieving young woman. We learn that even though her illness makes looking at the symbols and formulas used in a physics class painful and problematical, she is the only one in the class who aces it. This is a very bright individual. A special dimension is added as we go with her on this journey into and out of mental illness.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

The girls are at a luncheon and the narrator is eating everything in sight, especially the rich foods like avocados, butter, cheese and sour cream. It doesn't seem to matter what she eats; she doesn't gain weight. The others are eating salads because they are on diets.

Everyone is at the luncheon except Doreen, who is spending her day with Lenny Shepherd. The narrator's grandfather worked in food service at a country club and, although her grandmother was very frugal about the money she spent on food, he had introduced her to caviar. At the luncheon, she is gobbling up all the caviar she can get her hands on. Her manners leave a lot to be desired, but she believes that if you eat with a certain arrogance, you can get away with not following the accepted rules for dining. Once she has finished all the caviar, she goes to work on the avocados stuffed with crab salad.

Up until now, she has been a high achiever in everything, particularly academics, but she has suspected that something is going on with her, that she doesn't have the same drive anymore. She had several options for this day but chose to go back to bed; however, Jay Cee called and asked her to come in.

Jay Cee is concerned about her lack of commitment to her job and questions her about her plans for the future. It's only when she is answering these questions that she realizes that she is no longer interested in any future for herself. She is in the senior year of an honors program at her college, where she is required to take physics; not only does she hate physics, but all the squiggles make her sick. Nevertheless she makes the only A in the class, so she is expected to take chemistry.

Dealing with formulas is even more difficult for her. So she comes up with a plan: she will petition the Faculty Board to be allowed to monitor the class, since she would make an A anyway, and to take a course in Shakespeare for credit instead. On the strength of her record, the Faculty Board passes the petition. She goes to chemistry class and writes poetry; the professor is pleased because he thinks she is taking notes on his lectures. "If my Class Dean had known how scared and depressed I was . . . she wouldn't have listened to me for a minute," she writes.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

The narrator's hunger for rich foods is not normal. Her experience at the luncheon sets her apart from the others. Even if we had no other instances where her behavior is out of the range of normal, this one sounds alarm bells. Another signal that all is not well with her is that for the first time in her life, she is apathetic about success.

This is a sympathetic character. She is drawn by Plath in such a way that we are in her corner; we find her appealing, worthwhile and valuable. One of the devices Plath uses is the reaction of others to her. Jay Cee knows she has a valuable young talent on her hands and wants to foster it. Mrs. Guinea has recognized that she has such great potential that she is willing to put a considerable amount of money into opening up opportunities for her. She has such a sterling record with her college that she is virtually able to write her own ticket.

The narrator's difficulties with the physics and chemistry symbols are a foreshadowing of the illness that will eventually take her down. Sylvia Plath is able to write about these feelings about the symbols on the blackboard or on a page because she has experienced it. Current knowledge indicates that this is a symptom of schizophrenia.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

As she sits listening to Jay Cee, Esther unaccountably recalls the chemistry professor: "All the time she talked to me, I saw Mr. Manzi standing on thin air in back of Jay Cee's head. . . ."

Jay Cee gives her a pile of story manuscripts and is kind to her; and at noon, she sends her to the luncheon.

At this point the narrator returns, in her mind, to her childhood. Her mother taught shorthand and typing to support them after her father died. He hadn't trusted life insurance salesmen so they have nothing to live on. Her mother has urged her to learn shorthand so she will have a way to support herself.

The writer now fills in more of the protagonist's background. She is going to college on a scholarship given to her by Philomena Guinea, a wealthy novelist who is an alumna of the college. She wrote a letter to Mrs. Guinea requesting the scholarship and was invited to visit her at her estate, which was not far from the country club where her grandfather worked.

Returning to the present, the luncheon is followed by a special showing of a movie, during which the narrator becomes ill and goes back to her hotel room. Betsy, another one of the girls, is also not feeling well and looking very pale, so she goes with her. Both girls vomit on the floor of the cab. All the girls have severe cases of food poisoning from the crabmeat in the avocado cups, but our narrator has eaten more of it than anyone else and is very ill.

The hotel nurse cares for them and the doctor comes to visit. Doreen had skipped the luncheon so she is not sick and helps care for the narrator. *Ladies' Day*, the magazine

that is sponsoring the girls, sends a copy of their *Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year* book to each of them as a gift to compensate for the food poisoning.

#### Chapter 4 Analysis

The physical illness in this chapter foreshadows the even more threatening illness to come. It is also, in a way, a metaphor for that illness. This character becomes the sickest of all of the girls from the crabmeat and she is the one who will be stricken with serious mental illness.

This story does not delve into the causes of the mental illness, although there are indications that elements of her upbringing - the loss of her father and the quality of the mothering she received - might have contributed. If so, the crabmeat and the parenting could be echoing one another.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

When she was younger, the narrator had a crush on Buddy Willard for five years before he began to notice her. Their mothers were friends. He turns up at her college one weekend and wants to know whether he can come and see her sometime. She invites him to lunch but he says he is actually there to see Joan Gilling, a girl from their home town. They quarrel about the other girl, but Buddy leaves a letter inviting the narrator to the Yale Junior Prom, which increases the respect she receives from the other girls in her dorm.

The weekend of the Prom is disappointing; she had hoped that Buddy would fall in love with her. Instead he treats her like a cousin or a friend. He is studying medicine and takes her to a hilly place behind the chemistry lab and kisses her. "Wow, it makes me feel terrific to kiss you," he says, and plans to come and see her every third weekend.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

This novel has been considered by many a "coming-of-age" novel and has been favorably compared to JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Her long-term history with Buddy and her very adolescent expectations and reactions certainly support that reading. Adolescents are preoccupied with "falling in love" and are excessively possessive of their current boyfriends/girlfriends. The other girls in her dorm don't hold her in very high esteem until her weekend with Buddy, suggesting that she is not in the mainstream socially; but the behavior of the other girls is also typical of adolescents.

Plath's creation of Buddy is interesting. He is never a sympathetic character; that is, we don't identify with him and he is not admirable. We are only seeing him through

the eyes of the narrator/protagonist and she is no longer enamored of him. He doesn't come off very well and there is a certain distance between him and the reader. This functions very well as far as the telling of the story and its ultimate outcome are concerned. We already know that she is not going to be spending the rest of her life with him. We would expect that by this time they would have consummated the relationship because they've spent a lot of time together; but it hasn't happened, it doesn't happen and it's not going to happen.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

When Esther visits Buddy at school one weekend, he takes her on a tour of the laboratory and shows her cadavers; she watches him practice dissecting them. Then he shows her fetuses in big glass jars at various stages of development. She goes to some lectures and then on rounds with him and then ends up in the obstetrics/gynecology unit, where they observe the birth of a baby, including the episiotomy cut that facilitates the infant's emergence.

Afterwards they go to Buddy's room, drink a bottle of Dubonnet, and lie down on the bed side by side for awhile. He takes off his clothes so she can have the experience of seeing him naked. She refuses to reciprocate.

Their parents have always talked about how fine and clean Buddy is, but he tells her about a summer-long affair he had with a waitress in the hotel where he worked the previous summer. She is disgusted, not because of the affair, but because of Buddy's hypocrisy, his pretension that he is so pure. She decides that she no longer wants to marry him.

One day Buddy calls her at her dormitory to tell her that his annual chest x-ray has revealed that he has tuberculosis and he must go to a sanatorium in the Adirondacks. She assures him that she is sympathetic and that she'll write; but she's actually relieved because now she can say that he is sick, they are practically engaged, and she won't have to put up with boring blind dates any more.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Specialists in mental illness who have studied Sylvia Plath's symptoms many years later have diagnosed her disease as schizophrenia, an illness that is often triggered by

stressful life experiences. Esther, the protagonist in our story, is under extraordinary stress. With few financial resources of her own, she is dependent on what she can glean from other sources. She has obtained this opportunity in New York City by her own efforts and abilities and is living for the first time in a sophisticated and foreign environment. Living with girls from affluent backgrounds is creating its own pressures. Her efforts to build a future on her own without the financial support of a family have begun to take their toll.

She is at an age where sex itself has become a stressor; she is trying to figure out how to deal with her own sexuality and how to give it the appropriate place in her life. She has clearly outgrown Buddy, but she is unable to understand her feelings (or lack of them) in this perspective. Besides, although she has moved on, Buddy, and even more significantly, his parents, have not.

In the 1950s, before the redefinition of sexual matters that came about in the 1960s and 1970s, "purity" was a big thing. Most young people in that period were as stressed and confused about what was appropriate as Esther is in this story. If this were the only stress, it probably would not have brought on a breakdown; but it was a contributing factor.

Esther does not mention in this chapter that the visit to the laboratory and hospital and the gruesome images she witnesses there are affecting her adversely. Nevertheless, like the execution of the Rosenbergs, they have been an assault on her sensitivities. For any vulnerable adolescent, this would be bruising. When she begins to reach a crisis point in her illness, these are the images she sees. The fetuses are not in "bell jars" but they are in jars; and her feeling later that she herself is in a jar and can't breathe is directly related to this experience.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Buddy's mother has given a translator named Constantin Esther's phone number, so she visits the UN with him. He holds her hand and she feels happy for the first time in a long time. There is an episode while they are watching a UN debate during which her mind drifts off and she thinks of all the things she is not able to do, such as cooking and shorthand. She thinks of a very long list and realizes that she doesn't like the idea of serving men in any way. She feels very inadequate; the only thing she is good at is winning scholarships and prizes and that period of her life is coming to an end. Constantin takes her to lunch and it makes her feel so good that she decides that she will let him seduce her.

She goes to his room and they listen to balalaika music. She ponders her experience (or lack of it) with sex. To get back at Buddy, she feels that she should have sex with a man with experience, so she has been looking for the right person.

She recalls a long discussion she once had with the jilted boyfriend of a girl in her dorm about losing one's virginity. He had gone to a prep school and it was an unwritten rule that the boys must have experienced sex before graduation so he went to a prostitute. Based on that experience, he decided that sex was sheer animal behavior and that, while he would marry someone he loved, he would have sex with prostitutes so his wife wouldn't have to put up with any of that "dirty business."

Esther has had a lot of wine to drink, so she lies down on Constantin's bed. He soon joins her. They sleep, but they don't have sex. Her mother has sent her an article that advocates saving sex until marriage, but she doesn't like the idea of the woman being pure but the man being experienced like Buddy. She has begun to see the world as divided into people who have had sex and those who haven't. She has always liked boys from a distance, but as soon as they begin to become interested, she decides that

they won't do at all.

Lying beside Constantin, she imagines what it would be like to be married and she decides that wifely household chores would bore her. "This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's," she thinks.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The episode in this chapter where she drifts off mentally, in the midst of everything that is going on around her, to dwell on her perceived inadequacies is yet another symptom that Esther is not well.

In 1953, the strongly feminist feelings that this character expresses in this chapter were not being heard very often. Esther's resistance to playing the conventional role of wife and mother are not so surprising coming from a young woman who is succeeding so well at making her own way in life. We get no feeling that she is inclined to be dependent on a husband or that she needs anyone to take care of her. While Plath didn't play a major role in the feminist movement as writer Virginia Woolf did - she was too busy getting her career and marriage up and running and taking care of her children - she is, nevertheless, often mentioned as a feminist writer.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

The narrator and Buddy's father go to the Adirondacks to visit Buddy, taking turns driving. It's the day after Christmas and she is depressed. When Mr. Willard tells her that he and Buddy's mother had always wanted a daughter and that no daughter could be nicer than she is, she cries, but not because of what he has said. In this chapter we learn that the narrator's name is Esther. She is surprised to find that Mr. Willard is leaving her at the sanatorium to stay a few days with Buddy and that she will go back on the train alone.

Esther is already a published poet, an extraordinary feat for such a young writer; but throughout their relationship, Buddy has disparaged poetry as being inconsequential. Now he shows her a poem he has written that has been published in a magazine. He then asks her to marry him. She thinks about a time when she would have been ecstatic, but that time is long gone. She tells him that she is never going to get married, that she is neurotic and could never settle down.

She has never skied before and is not enthusiastic about doing so now; however, Buddy takes her to the slopes and teaches her, even though he, himself, has never skied before either. At his urging, she takes chances she is not prepared to take, takes a fall and breaks her leg in two places.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Would these young people have been together at all except for the parents? It does happen sometimes that parents determine whom their children's mates will be; and especially in static communities where families remain friends for generations, children of parents who are friends often marry. However, the pressure that the Willards are putting on Esther is not achieving the results for which they're hoping.

In fact, it appears that Esther and Buddy might have gotten together on their own if the parents had stayed out of it. One of the factors that is dampening Esther's enthusiasm for Buddy is his cloying closeness with his mother. The Willards' very smugness is distasteful to this young, creative woman who is already gaining recognition as a poet.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Esther is haunted by the imminent execution of the Rosenbergs. There is a picture-taking session for each girl and when they come to her, she bursts into a torrent of tears. We finally learn her full name in this chapter: Esther Greenwood.

The month in New York has come to an end and it's time to go home; but Esther is paralyzed, unable to pack her things. Doreen solves the problem by stuffing all her clothes under her bed and taking her to a party where her blind date is a Peruvian named Marco, a flashy man who wears a diamond stickpin on his lapel. She admires it and he gives it to her, implying that she will earn it before the evening is over. He seizes her arm so fiercely that he leaves bruises from his fingers. She's on her fourth daiquiri when Marco insists that she dance the tango with him.

At a break in the music, he takes her out to the garden and tells her that he is in love with his cousin but that she is going to be a nun. Then he throws Esther to the ground and attempts to rape her. She fights back, however, so he gives up. She tells Marco that she wants to find Doreen and go home.

He mutters, "Sluts, all sluts" and demands the return of the diamond that she had placed in her evening bag, but the bag had gone flying when he attacked her and she makes no attempt to find it. She had bloodied his nose in the struggle and he wipes his blood on her face with two fingers. She leaves him while he is looking for her bag.

When she can't find Doreen, she hitches a ride back to the hotel with someone else. Then she goes to her room, takes all the expensive clothes she has collected and tosses them over the balcony, one article at a time.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Now there are more obvious signs of Esther's deterioration. Her encounter with Marco is yet one more assault on her already fragile reason, but her ferocious and successful resistance to this rape says something about her. She may seem passive and she may be losing her grip on reality, but she is still strong enough to defend herself physically if the need arises. The cruel, barbaric Marco would have successfully assaulted a weaker victim. At least at this stage, Esther is no victim. She can still take care of herself.

Why did Plath include this incident in this story? Just because she is modeling this story on her own autobiography doesn't mean that nothing is fictionalized. There is no evidence that this incident is based on one in her own life, but it provides a contrast between the Esther at this point in the story and the Esther who becomes so dependent later on when she is so ill. She fights for her life here but later, she gives up and tries to take her life.

This incident makes her decline even more shocking because, not only does she fall to the lowest possible depths, but the distance she travels get there is so great. From a young woman eminently able to make her own way in the world to one who must endure electroshock treatment to get through her days is a very long fall in a very short time. In fact, the duration of her mental illness was only one summer; she went back to her college honors program in the Fall.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Esther takes the train home to Massachusetts, the bloody marks still on her face. She had to trade her bathrobe for clothes to wear home since she had thrown everything else away. Her mother picks her up at the train station and immediately tells her that she was not accepted for the writing course at school for which she'd applied. Now she has nothing to look forward to for the rest of the summer.

She lives with her mother in a small white clapboard house in the suburbs; they sleep on twin beds in the same room. Esther stays in bed most of the day, sometimes creeping to the window to watch a young mother from up the street walking her children. Her college roommate, who is expecting her back at school for the summer, calls her; but she tells her that she was not accepted for the course. She considers going anyway and taking another class instead but decides against it.

Esther is showing signs of mental deterioration: she is unable to read and sees bizarre things on the page. She tries to read a novel but she can't concentrate. She contemplates dropping the honors program - she will be a senior in the Fall - and going into a regular English program; but she has a generous scholarship and is preparing to write her senior thesis. She sees her family doctor to ask for more sleeping pills. He refuses to prescribe them and instead, sends her to a psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Sylvia Plath did not intend for this book to be published until after her mother's death. Her own premature death took that decision out of her hands. It was published while her mother was still alive; her mother, in turn, published some of Sylvia's letters to try to show the world that she wasn't responsible for her daughter's illness.

The insensitivity of the mother in this chapter, however, seems to suggest otherwise. Esther's appearance should have told her mother that something was terribly wrong; the blood is still on her face when she meets her at the train station. Yet the first words out of her mother's mouth are that Esther has been turned down for the writing class. Whether one's upbringing is a contributing factor to schizophrenia is unsettled; but when Esther is in the hospital, her mother's visits are so disturbing to her that the doctor cuts them off.

There is another side to the story, as there always is. Parents of mentally ill children frequently don't know what to do; they are not prepared to deal with this kind of illness. In Esther's case we see that, on several occasions, her mother believes that the problem is misbehavior.

If you would just behave yourself, she tells Esther, things would be better. She complains about the trouble Esther is causing her, as if that should somehow enable Esther to "straighten up." Mental illness does not work that way; simply wishing for things to change is useless. Like cancer or any other physical disorder, mental illness is a disease that requires treatment with effective therapies.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Three weeks later, Esther is still wearing the same unlaundered skirt and blouse for which she had traded her robe in New York City. She hasn't washed her hair for three weeks and hasn't slept for seven nights. It seems silly to her to wash, since she will just have to do it again.

Her visit with the psychiatrist consists of her telling him what she thinks is wrong, including her inability to sleep; although she leaves out some details, such as the fact that she can't control her handwriting. He asks what college she attends and, instead of listening to her and showing an interest in what is going on with her, tells her that he had worked there for awhile before going overseas. Then he tells her that the session is over and he will see her next week.

On her way home she encounters a sailor, who puts his arm around her waist and tries to talk her into going behind a monument so he can kiss her. She tells him that she is Elly Higginbottom from Chicago. Then she imagines that she sees Mrs. Willard coming across the park and suddenly tells him to leave her alone. When she realizes that the woman isn't Mrs. Willard, she explains to the sailor that she thought it was a woman from the orphanage in Chicago who had mistreated her. He sympathizes and she cries on his shoulder.

At her next visit, Dr. Gordon wants to know how she is this week; she answers, "The same." She takes out the scraps of a letter she had tried to write to Doreen, but hadn't been able to get her handwriting to work, and scatters them on his desk. After seeing the letter, the doctor says that he wants to talk to Esther's mother. Because Esther is showing even more signs of mental disease, Dr. Gordon prescribes electroshock treatment.

Esther continues her mental decline before she begins treatment. She reads about a suicide attempt and peers into the picture of the victim's face, feeling that he has something important to tell her. She thinks about how the Japanese disembowel themselves when they commit suicide. She hallucinates about her childhood and goes to the train station to try to find out how much money a ticket to Chicago would cost.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Plath's illness was never diagnosed. So much more is known about mental illness today than was known in the 1950s that the diagnosis and treatment described here seem extremely primitive. Mental health experts have concluded that she probably suffered from schizophrenia; they believe that her descriptions of her symptoms suggest this disease.

Some examples include Esther's perception that everything around her seems unreal and dangerous; the fact that she is unable to read because the letters are indecipherable to her; and the way her mother becomes very small when going away from her and looms scarily large when moving toward her in Dr. Gordon's office.

Another manifestation of schizophrenia is the catatonia that Esther exhibits in the story (catatonia is a condition characterized by a marked lack of movement, activity or expression); she wraps herself in a blanket and is inactive much of the time. In addition, occasional excessive motor activity, such as walking 48 blocks in New York City as Esther did in Chapter 2, is also typical. As mentioned earlier, Esther is paranoid, and paranoia is another symptom of this illness. Schizophrenia usually has its onset in the teen or early adult years but the course of the illness is unique to each patient.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Esther and her mother are in the waiting room of Dr. Gordon's clinic. Although Esther is registering the appearance of the other people there, her vision is distorted. Then she is taken to a room where the equipment is ready for the treatment. The electrodes are placed on her temples and "then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world," she writes. She wonders what terrible thing she has done. Afterwards, she tries to concentrate but cannot. She tells her mother that she will not go back to Dr. Gordon.

Now she explores ways to commit suicide. She plans to use a razor blade in the bathroom, thinking that she will slit her wrists and then get into a bathtub full of hot water. She has misgivings, though, about her ability to manage it, so she decides to practice on her leg. She doesn't go through with slitting her wrists, but puts two Band-Aids on the experimental cuts on her leg.

Then Esther goes to the beach with her collection of razor blades in her pocket. She plans to kill herself there, but it is crowded. Besides, she thinks, she doesn't have a warm bath there, so she considers renting a room. She contemplates letting the tide come in and just carry her out; but when it reaches her feet the water is so cold that she changes her mind.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

When Esther did not obtain admission to the summer writing class after her month in New York City, she was very alone. Her only companionship came in the evenings, when her mother was home from work. She is a prime example of the danger of leaving a suicidal person alone. We know from this chapter that Esther is determined to figure out a way to accomplish suicide.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Esther tries to hang herself with the cord from her mother's bathrobe, but she can't find a place high enough in their low-ceilinged house. She tries to strangle herself with the cord, but when the blood rushes to her face, her hands go weak and she can't finish the job. She can see that her body has built-in ways to avoid suicide.

All she is able to read now are tabloid scandal sheets; but when Esther buys some books on abnormal psychology at the drug store, she finds that she can, in fact, read them. She compares the symptoms to her own and concludes that she is crazy, as she suspected. The only alternative to killing herself, Esther thinks, is to go back to Dr. Gordon and his instruments of terror; but she knows that she doesn't want to do that.

Her friend Jody calls so Esther spends a day at the beach with her and her boyfriend and a blind date named Cal. She and Cal discuss a play and then she decides to go swimming. She sees a rock that is about a mile out and suggests that they swim to it. Cal says it's too far but she takes off, thinking that drowning would be a good way to die. She chickens out, however, and gives up.

At her mother's suggestion, Esther tries to volunteer at a hospital, but it turns out to be a disaster. She is unable to think clearly enough to do what she is expected to do.

She goes to the cemetery where her father is buried and looks for his grave. When she finds it, she collapses and cries, realizing that she has never cried for his death. She also remembers that her mother hasn't cried either. "I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain," she writes.

Finally Esther comes up with a suicide plan. She leaves a note saying that she has gone for a walk and then locates the key to the box in which her mother stores her

sleeping pills. She enters a crawl space in the basement and covers the opening with logs so that she can't be found. Then with a glass of water she's brought down with her, she swallows all 50 pills.

### Chapter 13 Analysis

People who are planning suicide often do "final things" like visiting the grave of a parent, as Esther does here. At this point in the story, it seems that Esther's mental illness has won, that she is not able to withstand it and has surrendered to it. However, the story is not over yet.

The people with whom Esther has contact do not pick up on the clues that she wants to kill herself, which says something about the involvement of her mother in her welfare. The signs were everywhere and her mother should have been able to notice them; but she is only impatient that her remarkable daughter, who has already gained recognition for her poetry, isn't taking a shorthand course.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Esther wakes up in a psychiatric ward. Her mother arrives with her brother (Esther's uncle) and she has a visit from a man she knows from church who works at the hospital. She tells him to get out.

They hospital staff don't want to give Esther a mirror but she insists. When she looks in the mirror she can't tell if it's a mirror or a picture; when she realizes that the face is hers, she throws the mirror to the floor and breaks it. This makes the nurse angry and she says, "You know where they'll take her!" So Esther is transported by ambulance to another hospital.

A number of white-coated figures interview her and one of them explains that a staff doctor will see her soon. She visits with her mother outside in a garden area and exhibits symptoms of paranoia; she is convinced that everyone is watching her and talking about her. Her mother complains that she is not behaving herself, but promises to try to get her out and take her to a better place.

Two incidents occur in which Esther riles the caretakers. The first one involves a man who delivers food to the patients. She won't let him take away a tureen of beans because some of the people have not yet helped themselves; he calls her Miss Mucky-Muck when his boss is out of range. At the first opportunity, she kicks him when no one is looking.

In the second incident, a nurse who is taking Esther's temperature places her basket of thermometers on Esther's bed. Esther deliberately knocks it off, breaking the thermometers. After this incident, Esther is moved to another room.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

The staff in this psychiatric hospital treats Esther like an obstreperous child, not like a person who is seriously ill. She has just been rescued, nearly dead, from a grave in which she placed herself; but the professionals responsible for her care don't seem to be aware of her fragility. The only measures that reflect their awareness that she is dangerously ill are the removal of all items, such as eating utensils, that she could possibly use to hurt herself. At this point in her illness, prevention is not nearly as relevant as is the urgency to develop an effective plan of treatment.

This story makes a statement about the treatment of mentally ill patients, although that is not its primary purpose. The care that Esther receives here is similar to the treatment that Plath received before she was moved to a private asylum.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Philomena Guinea, who had provided Esther's college scholarship, has read about her suicide attempt in a Boston newspaper. She arrives to remove Esther from the hospital and places her in a private treatment facility of her own choosing, with a golf course, grounds and gardens like a country club. Mrs. Guinea will pay for her treatment.

Esther knows that she should be grateful, but she is unable to feel anything. "If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, . . . I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air."

She has her own room and once the orderlies have settled her in, she gets up and explores. There seem to be no nurses or guards around, only people working in the kitchen preparing dinner and some women putting name labels on her clothes. Except for a girl named Natalie sitting in a chair in the lounge, no one seems to be around. She asks the attendant labeling her clothes where everyone is and she replies, "Oh, OT (occupational therapy), the golf course, playing badminton."

A female doctor, Dr. Nolan, is assigned to Esther. She asks Esther about Dr. Gordon and Esther tells her about the shock treatment. Dr. Nolan says that electroshock treatments are not supposed to be like that; done properly, she tells her, they are just like going to sleep. She tells Esther that she will not have shock treatment here but if she does, she assures her, she herself will be with her and she'll let Esther know ahead of time.

Esther finds that the worst cases are taken to a residence called Wymark. She fears that someone will discover she needs to be there instead of where she is. When they come to move her, she's sure her worst fears are being realized. Instead, she is being

moved to a brighter, more cheerful room. She is surprised to find Joan Gilling, the girl from her neighborhood that she and Buddy had quarreled over, living in the next room.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

While treatment by electric shock seems old-fashioned and primitive, it is, in fact, still used in some places in the United States. It remains controversial and there have been some cases of successful litigation because of its long-term effects.

Treatment involves passage of an electrical current through the brain in order to cause a major epileptic seizure; the purpose of this is to clear away the normal electrical patterns in the brain. A violent seizure is then usually followed by no activity at all, as if the patient were brain dead (some suggest that some cells may die). Today the patient is anesthetized before the treatment; in earlier times, the spasm was sometimes so violent that vertebrae and bones in the extremities would crack.

# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Joan Gilling had tried to commit suicide and had run away to New York City. There she had a breakdown and was treated in a big hospital where the psychiatrist had recommended group therapy. Eventually she ended up at this private asylum.

Joan has all the clippings from the newspapers about the search for Esther, so Esther finds out for the first time what happened after she crawled into the hole and took the sleeping pills. A major search had been conducted until finally, her mother had gone to the basement and heard her groans.

Esther is being treated with insulin injections that are supposed to bring on a shock that will pull her out of her illness; but she has a reaction to the medication and becomes very ill. She retreats again, wrapping herself in a blanket and remaining immobile all the time.

She is receiving many visitors, especially her mother, but does not seem to be getting better. She tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother, and the doctor steps in and decrees that she can no longer have visitors.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The private asylum described here is actually McLean Hospital, where Plath was treated thanks to the sponsorship of Olive Higgins Prouty, who had herself suffered a nervous breakdown 25 years previously. The psychiatrist who treated Plath was Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse; the two remained friends for life. Plath continued to consult with Barnhouse concerning her mental instability.

The story calls one of the psychiatric units Belsize; at McLean it was called Belknap. Another unit, called Wymark in the story, was Wyman at McLean.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Esther is moving up a level to Belsize, where Joan has preceded her. Joan now has walking, shopping and town privileges.

Esther still worries about shock treatments. She knows that those who are to receive shock therapy do not receive breakfast on the day of the treatment, so Esther is nervous every morning until her tray is brought.

The women in Belsize wear makeup and sit around and talk like girls in a college dormitory. One of them, DeeDee, plays piano and they all play bridge. Nurse Kennedy makes up a fourth hand and talks about her work at both the state hospital and here at the private one. Esther is still paranoid and is convinced that the nurse is hinting that she is not ready for Belsize.

One morning, Esther's tray does not come and she knows that she is going to get shock therapy. So she takes her blanket and curls up in a far corner of an alcove, thinking that they will not find her there. She is angry because Dr. Nolan has not warned her.

A nurse soon finds Esther and takes Dr. Nolan to her. Esther complains that she has broken her promise to tell her, but Dr. Nolan says that she has come especially early to tell her and to take her and stay with her. Esther is hooked up to the electrodes as before and expects the worst but it doesn't come; she just goes to sleep.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Like Esther, Plath had been subjected to inhumane electroshock treatment; her benefactor, Olive Higgins Prouty, felt that it had contributed to her suicide attempts. At McLean she received more professionally-administered treatments and it was after

these that she finally began to respond.

# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

When Esther wakes up, Dr. Nolan is there and Esther feels surprisingly at peace. "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air," she writes. She will be having the treatments three times a week, the number depending on how well she does.

Joan has lost her privileges and she comes to Esther's room to tell her that both of them have letters from Buddy. He is out of the tuberculosis hospital and wants to visit them. Esther discovers that Joan and DeeDee are having an affair, and Joan makes sexual overtures to Esther, but Esther rebuffs her. Esther discusses sexuality and her own virginity with Dr. Nolan. She tells her of her need and desire to have sex with a man, so the doctor sends her to a gynecologist to be fitted with a contraceptive device.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Symptoms of Esther's illness have included her complicated relationships with men. There had been several instances in which, under most circumstances, a woman would have engaged in sexual activity; but it hadn't happened. She and Buddy had plenty of opportunity, for example.

Her calculated wish to end her virginity is also unusual. People typically have sex spontaneously because of natural urges that are part of becoming a healthy adult. In this story, that never happens. Sex has been mostly a subject for discussion between Esther and various men who might have accommodated such an urge in her, had it existed.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Joan is graduating from the asylum and is going to room in Cambridge with Nurse Kennedy, whose roommate has just moved out. Esther was accepted back into her college academic program with Mrs. Guinea's scholarship, but she will continue to live at the asylum for the winter. Her doctors don't want her to live with her mother.

She at last has her chance to have sex with a man, a professor of mathematics named Irwin, a full professor at age 26. Ever since she learned about Buddy's sexual adventure, her virginity has felt like a millstone around her neck.

Intercourse is painful for her and once it is over, Irwin goes to the bathroom and takes a shower. However, Esther is bleeding profusely. At her request, Irwin drives her to Joan's house. Joan calls a taxi and accompanies Esther to a hospital emergency room, where she is attended to and is then taken back to the asylum.

Some time later Dr. Quinn, Joan's doctor, awakens Esther one night and asks her if she knows where Joan is; apparently Joan went to a movie in town but did not return. Esther doesn't know where she is and neither does anyone else. Search parties eventually find her body on the grounds of the asylum; Joan had hanged herself.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Esther has made a decision to find an appropriate man and get it over with; i.e., that she will lose her virginity. The man she chooses fits her requirements: he is intelligent, successful and experienced. Unfortunately, her choice turns out to be the worst possible partner. For him, it was purely physical gratification; there were no emotions involved at all. He doesn't seem to care who his female partner is. Of course, the experience brings no gratification for Esther.

When her sexual partner simply gets up when the act is completed to take a shower, Esther feels degraded and humiliated. This is a nightmare first experience for Esther. The hemorrhaging turns it into a disaster. For a young woman whose psyche is already fragile, this is a damaging event. What was Dr. Nolan thinking when she sent Esther for contraception?

Healthy sexual activity can contribute positively to mental health. The connection between healthy sexuality and a person's self-image and feelings of well-being is innate. Did Esther's doctor consider this in her counseling? While a positive experience borne of desire and affection could have made a difference at this point in Esther's recovery, a negative experience instead inflicted more psychic damage.

As *The Catcher in the Rye* is regarded as a guide for young men on their passage into adulthood, *The Bell Jar* has been considered a similar guide for young women. One wonders if it is a very accurate or useful one, however, given the unhealthy nature of Esther's relationships with the men in this story.

# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

It is January and Mrs. Guinea picks Esther up at the asylum to take her to her college dormitory. Esther's memory is intact - she can recall everything: the cadavers, the fetuses, the episiotomy, Doreen, Marco's diamond, Dr. Gordon, her suicide attempts and more.

Buddy arrives in his mother's car to visit her before she leaves the asylum and gets stuck in a snowdrift. Esther discovers that she feels nothing for him, but she gets a shovel and helps dig him out, doing most of the work because it's too strenuous for him after his TB.

Then Buddy asks Esther a question: does she think that there's something about him that drives women crazy, since he dated both Joan and her and both of them became mentally ill? Esther tells him, "You had nothing to do with us, Buddy."

As she leaves for college at last, Esther wonders if she'll ever have to go through this again. "How did I know that someday - at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" She calls Irwin, the professor to whom she had so traumatically given her virginity, and sends him her hospital and doctor bills. She never wants to see him again. She feels perfectly free and exclaims, "I am! I am! I am!"

## Chapter 20 Analysis

This chapter suggests that the outcome of the story is victory for Esther after her successful electroshock treatment. There have been so many ups and downs for her, however, that we may be unconvinced that she has won her struggle; still, the story ends with Esther apparently back to normal. She is able to pick up her life where she

left off. For purposes of the story, the plot has come full circle and is complete.

For Plath, however, much of whose life is documented in this story, things turned out differently. The illness returned and at the age of 30, she was driven to take her own life.

One of the most remarkable things about the story of Esther and the life of Sylvia Plath is their shared ability to achieve success in the world. Both were so outstandingly talented that they were writing and publishing poetry at an early age. Both were able, by their own ingenuity, to leverage that talent into extraordinary opportunities. Both were also models of self-sufficiency; with little help from anyone, they found the people who could provide the support they needed to advance their careers. Yet sadly, both were mentally ill, self-destructive and suicidal.

Plath wrote the most tragic kind of foreshadowing in this chapter as Esther leaves the asylum: "How did I know that someday - at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?"

# 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,

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## **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.

## **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 offhand 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.

# 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 baby-sits 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 unglam-orous 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.

# 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.

# Style

## 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 institutional-ization, 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.

*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 mid-air 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."

# 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 nonclinical 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.

# 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 not know 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 latter 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*.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*In the following essay, Johnson, a doctoral candidate at Yale University, notes that while *The Bell Jar* has been interpreted as representing the lack of choices facing women in the 1950s, the portrayal of protagonist Esther Greenwood shows her as alienated even from other women who might be in her position. The critic also examines the possibilities created by looking at the poetic aspects of the novel.*

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 brainwashed, 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 die psychiatric hospital, she distinguishes herself

from the other women there. Esther is repulsed by Valerie, yvho 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 stncter 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 im-practicality 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, Irwin, 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 *Mile*, 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 hoof-taps.

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: Jeannine Johnson, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale 1997

## Critical Essay #2

*In this excerpt, the critic discusses the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, in relation to themes in the novel, including alienation, her search for identity, and generational conflict.*

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

inappropriate-ness 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 *bil-dungsroman*, 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 re-located 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 Higginbot-tom* 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 *bil-dungsroman* 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

## Critical Essay #3

*In the following review, Maloff traces the publishing history of *The Bell Jar* and concludes that "good as it is," the novel has "an absence of weight and complexity sufficient to the subject."*

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 mis-read" their intention, as toward the end, one supposes, she mis-read 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

boy-friend, 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 hi mid-air" 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, door-less 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 theatncally staged is the scene. Yet even then, after breakdown and hospi-talization, 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 afte/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.

# 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.

# 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.

# Compare & 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 nonwhite men; the third most likely group was white women; the least likely group

was nonwhite 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.

# 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 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.

# Further Reading

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 Cornell, *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

Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, Harper, 1947.

Authors make the case for women not being in the work force

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Norton, 1963. Pivotal study of middle-class, American women's dissatisfaction with sex roles

Susan Smader Lanser, "Beyond *The Bell Jar*: Women Students of the 1970s," in *Radical Teacher*, December, 1977, pp. 41-4.

Article stresses that Plath's novel must be viewed in the context of the 1950s.

Sheryl L. Meyenng, *Sylvia Plath: A Reference Guide, 1973-1988*, G K Hall, 1990

An extensive bibliography of Plath criticism up to 1988

Charles Newman, editor, *The Art of Sylvia Plath- A Symposium*, Indiana University Press, 1970

An early assortment of reviews, reminiscences, then-unpubhshed poems, and critical essays. Some of the essays are uniquely analytical in their approach to Plath's poetry. Includes a brief essay on *The Bell Jar* written before the novel had been published in the United States

Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes, Harper, 1981.

Plath's complete poems, including juvenilia, with notes by Hughes. Winner of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize.

Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, Dial Press, 1982. Selections from Plath's private journals

Aureha Schober Plath, editor, *Letters Home Correspondence 1950-1963*, Harper, 1975

A collection of Plath's letters edited by her mother.

Ellen Rosenberg, "Sylvia Plath," in *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography The New Consciousness, 1941-1968*, edited by Richard Layman and Lucia Tarbox, Gale Research Company, 1987, pp. 408-22

Provides biographical information on Sylvia Plath, as well as some analysis of her poetry

Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Virago Press, 1991

Focusing primarily on Plath's poetry, Rose promotes the term "fantasy" as a key term by which to understand the complexities of Plath's self-representation and her psychologized, gendered, and sexualized poetics.

Tom Salvidar, *Sylvia Plath Confessing the Fictive Self*, Lang, 1992

In a study primarily of Plath's poetry, Salvidar takes issue with those who reject the "confessional" label for Plath. She argues that Plath asserts a fictive "I" by presenting selective incidents from her life in order to incarnate a real, individual self through literature.

Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame. A Life of Sylvia Plath*, Viking, 1989

Of the many Plath biographies, Stevenson's is perhaps the least speculative. It received considerable blessing from the Hughes estate, which controls Plath's writings.

Linda W. Wagner, editor, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, G. K. Hall, 1984.

A collection of reviews and critical essays, the latter mostly written from a feminist literary perspective.

Linda W. Wagner, editor, *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, 1988

A valuable anthology of reviews and short studies of Plath's work. Includes short biographical information on the reviewers.

# Sources

Paula Bennett, *My Life a Loaded Gun*, Beacon, 1986. Lynda K. Bundtzen, "Women in *The Bell Jar* Two Allegories" from *Plath's Incarnations Women and the Creative Process*, University of Michigan Press, 1983

Rupert Butler, "New American Fiction Three Disappointing Novels--But One Good Time," in *Time and Tide*, January 31, 1963, p. 34

C B Cox, editorial in *Critical Quarterly*, Autumn, 1966, p 195

Louis Dublin, *Suicide- A Sociological and Statistical Study*, Ronald, 1963

David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath Poetry and Existence*, Athlone, 1976

Laurence Lerner, "New Novels," in *Listener*, January 31, 1963, p 215.

M. L. Rosenthal, "Blood and Plunder," in *Spectator*, September 30, 1966, p 418.

Robert Scholes, review in *New York Times Book Review*, April 11, 1971, p. 7

Stan Smith, "Attitudes Counterfeiting Life. The Irony of Artifice in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," in *Critical Quarterly*, Autumn, 1975, pp 247-60

Patricia Meyer Spacks, "A Chronicle of Women," in *Hudson River*, Spring, 1972, p 164

Tony Tanner, in his *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970*, Harper & Row, 1971

Robert Taubman, "Anti-heroes," *New Statesman*, January 25, 1963, pp. 127-28

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

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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to

information about the work. Part of Gale's For Students Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

## Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members educational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.

- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as *The Narrator* and alphabetized as *Narrator*. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name *Jean Louise Finch* would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname *Scout Finch*.
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the *Subject/Theme Index*.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the *Glossary*.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first

received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.

- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).
- **Sources:** an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- **Further Reading:** an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- **Media Adaptations:** a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- **Topics for Further Study:** a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- **Compare and Contrast Box:** an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- **What Do I Read Next?:** a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures,

and eras.

## Other Features

NfS includes *The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature*, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how *Novels for Students* can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

## Citing *Novels for Students*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of *Novels for Students* may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. *Novels for Students*. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the *Criticism* subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. *Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio*. *Novels for Students*. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition*, *Canadian Literature* No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in *Novels for Students*, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. *Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask*, in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in *Novels for Students*, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

## We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of *Novels for Students* welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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