



The Bell Jar

By Sylvia Plath
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Introduction

"I was supposed to be having the time of my life."

As it turns out, Esther Greenwood—brilliant, talented, successful, and increasingly vulnerable and disturbed—does have an eventful summer. *The Bell Jar* follows Esther, step by painful step, from her New York City June as a guest editor at a fashion magazine through the following, snow-deluged January. Esther slides ever deeper into devastating depression, attempts suicide, undergoes bungled electroshock therapy, and enters a private hospital. In telling her own story—based on Plath's own summer, fall, and winter of 1953-1954—Esther introduces us to her mother, her boyfriend Buddy, her fellow student editors, college and home-town acquaintances, and fellow patients. She scrutinizes her increasingly strained relationships, her own thoughts and feelings, and society's hypocritical

conventions, but is defenseless against the psychological wounds inflicted by others, by her world, and by herself. Pitting her own aspirations against the oppressive expectations of others, Esther cannot keep the airless bell jar of depression and despair from descending over her. Sylvia Plath's extraordinary novel ("witty and disturbing," said the *New York Times*) ends with the hope, if not the clear promise, of recovery.

Questions for Discussion

1. What factors, components, and stages of Esther Greenwood's descent into depression and madness are specified? How inevitable is that descent?
2. In a letter while at college, Plath wrote that "I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar." Is this the primary meaning of the novel's titular bell jar? What other meanings does "the bell jar" have?
3. What terms does Esther use to describe herself? How does she compare or contrast herself with Doreen and others in New York City, or with Joan and other patients in the hospital?
4. What instances and images of distortion occur in the novel? What are their contexts and significance? Does Esther achieve a clear, undistorted view of herself?
5. Are Esther's attitudes toward men, sex, and marriage peculiar to herself? What role do her attitudes play in her breakdown? What are we told about her society's expectations regarding men and women, sexuality, and relationships? Have those expectations changed since that time?
6. Esther more than once admits to feelings of inadequacy. Is Esther's sense of her own inadequacies consistent with reality? Against what standards does she judge herself?
7. With what specific setting, event, and person is Esther's first thought of suicide associated? Why? In what circumstances do subsequent thoughts and plans concerning suicide occur?8. In addition to Deer Island Prison, what other images and conditions of physical and emotional imprisonment, enclosure, confinement, and punishment are presented?9. What are the primary relationships in Esther's life? Is she consistent in her behavior and attitudes within these relationships?

About the Author

To this day, Sylvia Plath's writings continue to inspire and provoke. Her only published novel, *The Bell Jar*, remains a classic of American literature, and *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1971), and *The Collected Poems* (1981) have placed her among this century's essential American poets.

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, the first child of Aurelia and Otto Plath. When Sylvia was eight years old, her father died—an event that would haunt her remaining years—and the family moved to the college town of Wellesley. By high school, Plath's talents were firmly established; in fact, her first published poem had appeared when she was eight. In 1950, she entered Smith College, where she excelled academically and continued to write; and in 1951 she won *Mademoiselle* magazine's fiction contest. Her experiences during the summer of 1953—as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* in New York City and in deepening depression back home—provided the basis for *The Bell Jar*. Near that summer's end, Plath nearly succeeded in killing herself. After therapy and electroshock, however, she resumed her academic and literary endeavors. Plath graduated from Smith in 1955 and, as a Fulbright Scholar, entered Newnham College, in Cambridge, England, where she met the British poet, Ted Hughes. They were married a year later. After a two-year tenure on the Smith College faculty and a brief stint in Boston, Plath and Hughes returned to England, where their two children were born.

Plath had been successful in placing poems in several prestigious magazines, but suffered repeated rejection in her attempts to place a first book. *The Colossus* appeared in England, however, in the fall of 1960, and the publisher, William Heinemann, also bought her first novel. By June 1962, she had begun the poems that eventually appeared in *Ariel*. Later that year, separated from Hughes, Plath immersed herself in caring for her children, completing *The Bell Jar*, and writing poems at a breathtaking pace.

A few days before Christmas 1962, she moved with the children to a London flat. By the time *The Bell Jar* was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, in early 1963, she was in desperate circumstances. Her marriage was over, she and her children were ill, and the winter was the coldest in a century. Early on the morning of February 11, Plath turned on the cooking gas and killed herself.

Plath was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for her *Collected Poems*.