

The Bell Jar Sylvia Plath Pseudonym: Victoria

Lucas **Born:** October 27, 1932; Boston, Massachusetts **Died:** February 11, 1963; London, England

Quick Reference

First published: 1963

Type of work:

Novel

Type of plot: Psychological realism

Time of plot: 1953

Locale: New York City and New England

Principal characters Esther Greenwood, a college student

Doreen, a friend and guest editor

Mrs. Greenwood, Esther's widowed mother

Buddy Willard, a boyfriend of Esther

Doctor Nolan, a psychiatrist

Joan Gilling, Esther's colleague

The Story:

Esther Greenwood is in New York City the summer that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are to be executed (1953). Ecstatic over having won a position as guest editor on the college board for a well-known magazine for young women, she is puzzled that she is not having the time of her life.

On the face of it, she has everything going for her. She is attractive, intelligent, and talented. She is a straight-A student. The magazine arranges concerts, dances, celebrity interviews, fashion shows, and luncheons galore for the twelve college student women who won positions as guest editors. Why is she feeling depressed? Esther's boyfriend Buddy is in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis. She is discovering that her feelings for him are lukewarm. She feels free to date other men, but somehow those dates are not turning out as well as she expects.

She and the eleven other young women from colleges across the United States are living in a hotel for women. Doreen, who is cynical and audacious, particularly appeals to Esther. One night on their way to a party, they let themselves be picked up by a disc jockey, Lenny Shepherd. After drinks he asks them to his apartment. After more drinks, Doreen and Lenny dance lasciviously. Esther is disgusted. She leaves Doreen and walks back to the hotel disillusioned with Doreen and later with herself for abandoning Doreen. Doreen is not the only reason Esther is disillusioned. The city glamour she expected manifests itself as a series of shoddy episodes. Behind the glittery surfaces she sees a world of competition, meanness, fakery, and backbreaking work leading to some trivial end.

Esther and the other young women are invited to a "ladies' magazine" luncheon. Beautifully presented crabmeat salad is served, but later they are all violently sick. The crabmeat was tainted. Another event in New York City that was supposed to be wonderful is spoiled.

Another spoiled event for Esther is the work she is assigned at the magazine. She is a perfectionist, an overachiever, and always anxious about deadlines. Stress becomes apparent during a photography session. Esther, told to hold a paper rose and smile (to represent her dream to be a poet), bursts into tears.

Later, however, she lets Doreen talk her into going out on another date. It is another fiasco. Ripping Esther's dress and throwing her in the mud, calling her a slut, the "country-club gentleman" date, Marco, tries to rape her. She escapes and once again flees back to her hotel.

Her stint as guest editor over, in a gesture of her feelings, Esther throws all of her new clothes off the roof of the hotel. In the morning she leaves for home. Her mother meets her at the train station. Esther hates their small house and the suburbs and plans to escape by attending a creative writing seminar at Harvard. She is not accepted. The rejection, in addition to her recent experiences, sends her into depression. She cannot concentrate on writing her honors thesis. She tries to work on a novel, but disappointment and despondency lock her in lethargy. Esther's apathy worries her mother who, at her wits' end, suggest they see a psychiatrist.

Unfortunately, the psychiatrist, Doctor Gordon, is the wrong doctor for Esther. She finds him insensitive and patronizing. In addition, the shock treatments he prescribes for her not only frighten her but also send her into a deeper depression. Esther begins to dwell on suicide even though she attempts to do normal things, such as double-dating and hospital volunteer work.

One rainy day, after visiting the grave of her father, she returns home, leaves a note that she is going for a walk, takes a bottle of sleeping pills and a glass of water, and goes to the basement. Hiding herself in a crawl space behind some firewood, she swallows the pills. She takes too many, causing her to vomit, which saves her life. Now desperate, her mother sends Esther to a state mental institution.

At this point Esther's benefactress, Philomena Guinea, proposes that Esther be sent to a private hospital. Philomena will finance it. At the new institution Esther begins to improve. Doctor Nolan, her psychiatrist, an intuitive woman, gains Esther's trust. Intuitive people gain Esther's approval. Esther learns that it is all right to say that one hates one's mother. She also learns that her need to be sexually active is not only normal but also feasible. Doctor Nolan prescribes birth control. Under compassionate supervision and carefully conducted shock treatments, Esther begins to improve.

One of Esther's college friends, Joan Gilling, is also at the hospital. Joan, like Esther, tried to kill herself. In addition, like Esther, Joan dated Buddy Willard, but at the hospital Joan confesses that she prefers women to men. Initially disgusted with Joan's homosexuality, Esther nevertheless continues to befriend Joan. Eventually, Esther and Joan are allowed town and overnight privileges from the hospital. On one of these outings, Esther has her first sexual experience with a professor she meets. Esther's experience is another misadventure. She begins to hemorrhage. The professor, in a panic, takes her to the apartment where Joan is staying. Joan, upset, takes Esther to an emergency ward, and a doctor repairs the damage. One in a million, he says.

A few days later, Joan hangs herself. Doctor Nolan, worried that Joan's suicide will throw Esther back into despair, assures her that no one is to blame. A sign of Esther's newly gained stability is that neither her sexual misadventure nor Joan's suicide casts her into depression. Buddy then visits Esther at the sanatorium and tells her that she is no longer a suitable marriage prospect. Esther is not disturbed. In fact, his pompous announcement frees her. Buddy, from then on, is out of her life. It is another sign of her recovery that she responds in a healthy way to his announcement. Esther is well. She has the strength to face the panel of doctors, who, if she passes their examinations, will discharge her from the hospital. She will take charge, once again, of her destiny.

Critical Evaluation: The Bell Jar is the only novel by Sylvia Plath, who is best known as a poet. Her novel was published in England in January, 1963, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. Plath committed suicide in February of the same year. Since its publication, The Bell Jar has received steady acclaim. Critics first viewed it as a fine first novel in the style of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The Bell Jar was published in the United States in 1971. Critics in the United States also praised the novel. It was a complex psychological portrayal of a young woman of the early 1950's. Esther Greenwood, in her search for self-determination, is a prototype heroine of the mid-century women's movement, a movement heralded by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.

Plath had written a rough draft of *The Bell Jar* by 1960, and she won a grant to finish it from the Eugene F. Saxton Foundation. In a letter to her brother, she called the work a "pot-boiler." Her prose, however, took a turn from the mediocre to the remarkable; her poetry had already taken this turn. The poet Ted

Hughes, Plath's husband, described Plath's rather sudden change from talent to genius as a "plunge into herself," into the subjective, the imaginary. That the novel contains so much of "herself" was her reason for publishing it under a pseudonym. She did not want to offend anyone she knew; the characters in the novel had their counterparts in life.

The protagonist, Esther, is a young woman who sees life as if from within a bell jar. Her experiences are askew, not what they are supposed to be. There is always "a worm in the rose." She has a "perfect" boyfriend, but rather than finding him romantic she finds him dull, pilloried by mother's maxims. She watches a baby being born and instead of seeing a miracle, she sees brutality. She goes to New York City to have the time of her life, but the time of her life is overshadowed by the execution of the Rosenbergs. She discovers that the job of her dreams is contrived; she sees that the woman's world of fashion, romance, and domesticity is a sham.

What Plath learned when she wrote her honors thesis, "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevski's Novels," was "stuff about the ego as symbolized in reflections (mirror and water), shadows, twins." She wrote that "recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration." *The Bell Jar* is, to some degree, a fictional account of this study. Throughout the novel, Plath shows the double, "the various mirror images" of the ego. Images of the double resonate throughout the narrative.

Esther's face is an example of the double. After traumatic episodes, Esther sees her face mirrored as some kind of blotched, distorted, bloated image — an icon, she thinks, to her dark nature. Her "good" face is restored only after she undergoes a purging ritual, one that can be as simple as a hot bath, as radical as throwing her new clothes off the rooftop of a hotel or as desperate as a suicide attempt. The double is not only associated with Esther's face but also associated with the faces of other people. The other face of Hilda, a guest editor, a young woman of high fashion, impeccably dressed, appears when she tells Esther that she is "so glad" the Rosenbergs are going to die. Out of her mouth echoes the voice of a demon. "Fashion" and "devil" are doubles of Hilda. Joan Gilling's suicide and lesbian sexuality is the other side of the face of the privileged American girl. In addition to people, events also have double faces. A ladies' luncheon, put on by a glossy magazine epitomizing the glamorous "face" of feminine dreams, is elegantly presented, but the plates of crabmeat and avocado are poisonous.

The double motif exposes the hypocrisy that lies beneath the glamorous, glitzy surfaces of a mercantile society. The result is a densely packed, quickly paced novel, one that, in spite of its youthful tone, is complex. It describes the journey of a young woman undergoing trials and pitfalls in her search for an authentic life.

Essay by: Alice L. Swensen

Further Reading

Alexander, Paul, ed. *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. The essays in this volume concentrate on Plath as a craftsperson. Two of the essays, "Esther Came Back

Like a Retreaded Tire” by Robert Scholes and “Victoria Lucas and Elly Higginbottom” by Vance Bourjaily, deal solely with interpretations of *The Bell Jar*.

Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. In the preface, the author describes his work as “a biography of the imagination.” The chapter “A Woman Famous Among Women,” proposing Virginia Woolf’s influence on Plath, offers an interesting contrast and comparison between Clarissa Dalloway, from Woolf’s 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Esther Greenwood. Includes a portrait of Plath and an extensive bibliography.

Badia, Janet. “The Bell Jar, and Other Prose.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. In addition to Badia’s analysis of Plath’s prose, this collection includes essays on Plath and psychoanalysis and the problem of biography when dealing with Plath’s work.

Bundtzen, Lynda K. *Plath’s Incarnations: Women and the Creative Process*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983. Combines psychological and feminist criticism in a critical biography. Bundtzen traces Plath’s personal development as an artist and relates that development to the image of women in society and the world of art. The index provides topical guidance for information on *The Bell Jar*, and the chapter “The Bell Jar: The Past as Allegory” offers an interpretation of the novel as feminist allegory. Includes a bibliography.

Gentry, Deborah S. *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. Analyzes the motif and theme of suicide in *The Bell Jar*, applying theories that divide women literary characters who commit suicide into angels or monsters.

Hall, Caroline King Barnard. *Sylvia Plath, Revised*. Boston: Twayne, 1998. A revised edition of the introductory overview originally published in 1978. Contains an expanded discussion of *The Bell Jar* and updated information about Plath scholarship.

MacPherson, Pat. *Reflecting on “The Bell Jar.”* New York: Routledge, 1991. Focuses on the social context of *The Bell Jar*, including examinations of postwar life in the suburbs, the hatred of one’s mother expressed in films of the 1950’s, and homosexuality. Discusses how the era’s Cold War paranoia, introduced in the novel by the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, affects the protagonist personally. The bibliography contains relevant sociological and political entries.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. “The Bell Jar”: A Novel of the Fifties. Boston: Twayne, 1992. An excellent analysis of the novel in the context of its times and the author’s life.

_____, ed. *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Reprints reviews of Plath’s work at the time it was published, including ten reviews and essays on *The Bell Jar*.

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Works Cited Swensen, Alice L. "The Bell Jar." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition*, Nov. 2010, pp. 1–3. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103331MP411759820000029&site=lrc-live. <!--Additional Information: Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103331MP411759820000029&site=lrc-live> End of citation-->