

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Understanding Cultural and Historical Context in an Iconic Text

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Sylvia Plath's first and only published novel, *The Bell Jar*, was controversial, influential, and culturally relevant when it was first published, and it remains so five decades later. Prior to writing the novel Plath had published only poems and a few short stories, but writing a piece of long fiction or a novel was something she had always intended to do, as she stated in a 1962 interview with Peter Orr. "I always wanted to write the long short story, I wanted to write a novel," she said, adding that novels are able to convey "what one finds in daily life." *The Bell Jar*, set in 1953, chronicles six months in the life of twenty-year-old Esther Greenwood: her internship at *Ladies' Day* magazine and experiences in New York City; her return to the suburbs; her breakdown; her suicide attempts, one of which almost succeeds; her hospitalizations; and her recovery and return to college. Throughout these trials, she struggles with the cultural conventions of the 1950s as she attempts to pursue a course that is considered "un-American" and "unfeminine" at the time: her commitment to becoming an intellectual, her resistance to marriage and motherhood, and her desire to become a poet.

In her letters, Plath called her work an "autobiographical apprentice work." She loosely based the novel on the twentieth year of her life. During this period, Plath experienced a breakdown, attempted suicide, and was hospitalized at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, until she recovered and returned to college. Plath's letters and journals document the turmoil of this period in her life.¹

Plath began working on *The Bell Jar* in 1961, shortly after the publication of her first book of poems, *The Colossus*. That year, she also gave birth to her daughter, Frieda Rebecca, and suffered a miscarriage. In 1962, Plath gave birth to a son, Nicholas Farrar, and decided to sepa-

rate from her husband, Ted Hughes; she moved to an apartment in London with her children. As Hughes later recalled, Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* quickly and with little revision: “In the spring of 1961 by good luck circumstances cooperated, giving her time and place to work uninterruptedly. Then at top speed and with very little revision from start to finish she wrote *The Bell Jar*” (2). Plath wrote the novel under the sponsorship of the Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, which was affiliated with the publishing company Harper & Row; however, when she sent the manuscript to the Saxon committee for review in late 1962, the committee rejected it, calling it “disappointing, juvenile, and overwrought.” Plath then sent the manuscript to a British publisher, William Heinemann.

On January 14, 1963, the first edition of *The Bell Jar* was published in England under the pseudonym “Victoria Lucas.” It is possible that Plath used a pen name to protect individuals portrayed in the novel. As Hughes puts it, the book “dramatizes the decisive event of [Plath’s] adult life, which was her attempted suicide and accidental survival” (2). Upon its release in England, *The Bell Jar* received a limited number of reviews, most of them positive. Laurence Lerner of *The Listener* observed that it offered intelligent “criticisms of American society” and managed, unusually, both to be “tremendously readable” and to achieve “an almost poetic delicacy of perception.” But the limited critical reception disappointed Plath.

The book launched what was to be the final phase of Plath’s literary career. On February 11, 1963, a few weeks after the novel appeared, Sylvia Plath committed suicide. Given that her tragic death followed so soon after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, and given the thematic content of the book, the novel is often misunderstood as being altogether autobiographical. Many have also argued that publishers used the press attention generated by Plath’s death to market the novel. As Marjorie G. Perloff points out, the dust jacket of the later American Harper edition melodramatically invites the reader to read about “the crackup of Esther Greenwood: brilliant, beautiful, enormously tal-

ented, successful—but slowly going under, and maybe for the last time” (507). There is little direct evidence to indicate whether Plath intended the book to be read autobiographically. The publisher’s note issues this disclaimer: “All characters and events are a product of the author’s imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.”

In 1965, Hughes edited and published Plath’s most famous and final book of poems, *Ariel*. As she was writing these poems, Plath described them in a letter to her mother as some of the “best poems of my life—poems that would make my name” (*Letters* 468, 477). Some that were later published as part of *Ariel* were written on the backs of draft pages of *The Bell Jar*. *Ariel* remains a huge literary success almost five decades later. Before she died, Plath had prepared the manuscript for publication; however, Hughes did not follow Plath’s wishes and published the poems in a different order. In 2004, Plath’s daughter, Frieda Hughes, reissued the collection in the order her mother had intended.

On September 1, 1966, Faber republished *The Bell Jar* in England, crediting Plath as the author, and shortly afterward, American publishers declared interest in publishing the work in the United States. Much concern arose after Plath’s death over publishing the novel in her native land. Sylvia Plath’s mother, Aurelia, recalled shortly before the book was published in the United States, in a letter to her daughter’s editor at Harper & Row in New York:

I do want to tell you of one of the last conversations I had with my daughter in early July 1962, just before her personal world fell apart. Sylvia had told me of the pressure she was under in fulfilling her obligation to the Eugene Saxton Fund. As you know, she had a miscarriage, an appendectomy, and had given birth to her second child, Nicholas. “What I’ve done,” I remember her saying, “is throw together events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color—it’s a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. . . . I’ve tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar.”

Aurelia went on to plead with the publisher not to publish the book, because of her concerns that the real people upon whom the characters in Plath's novel are based would be offended, but the book was published nevertheless.²

The Bell Jar was first published in the United States in 1971, exploding onto the best-seller charts. Since that time, more than two million copies have been sold in the United States alone. Bantam Books brought out an initial paperback edition in April 1972 with a print run of 357,000 copies. That initial printing sold out, as did a second and a third printing, within a month, and Plath's novel remained on the best-seller lists for twenty-four weeks. *The Bell Jar* has been translated into nearly a dozen languages and was made into a feature-length film in 1979 starring Marilyn Hassett. Another film adaptation of the novel starring Julia Stiles is scheduled to be released by Plum Pictures in 2012. References to the novel have appeared in numerous movies, songs and television shows, including *Gilmore Girls* and *The Simpsons*. The book itself has made cameo appearances in American movies as disparate as the teen comedy *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), where it is shown being read by the cynical feminist protagonist, Kat Stratford, and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), in which the book appears face down on the bed next to Mallory Knox a few moments before she murders her abusive parents. Often when the novel appears in American films and television series, it stands in as a symbol for teenage angst, often on the part of a female protagonist. In one episode of the animated TV show *Family Guy*, the teenage daughter, Meg, is seen reading *The Bell Jar* instead of attending a spring-break party. As Janet Badia points out in an essay on pop culture appropriations of the novel, "perhaps *Family Guy* uses the comical image of Meg reading *The Bell Jar* [instead of attending a party] to pose a serious question about whether it is fair to diagnose a young woman's mental state from the book she chooses to read" (154). Whatever the intent, it is worth noting that, fifty years after it was written, the book is still invoked as shorthand for teen angst.

Beginning in the 1980s, *The Bell Jar* was introduced to many young readers in secondary and postsecondary English and language-arts curricula across the United States. The book has been compared favorably to some of the most acclaimed coming-of-age novels, including Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. As a coming-of-age novel, or bildungsroman, the book had great cultural significance for the generation that first read it in the 1970s. As Perloff notes, despite *The Bell Jar*'s seemingly dated setting, the book

bec[a]me for the young of the early seventies what *The Catcher in the Rye* was to their counterparts of the fifties: the archetypal novel that mirrors, in however distorted a form, their own personal experience, their sense of what Irving Howe calls "the general human condition." (508)

While Perloff finds Plath's novel timeless and universal, the book's sternest critics, including Harold Bloom, dismiss it as a "period piece, a portrait of a poet as a very young woman in the long-vanished United States of the 1950s" (7). By the 1970s, Plath was as well-known for her legions of fans as she was for her writing. As Helen Dudar describes in her article "From Book to Cult," Plath and her novel became a "cult figure and a cult object for several generations of young and over-30 readers, many of them women" (3). For many teenage girls, reading *The Bell Jar* has become a rite of passage, whether encouraged by their peers or by teachers and/or mothers who were influenced by the book in their own youth.

As Elaine Showalter states, "*The Bell Jar* is very much a novel about the fifties" (438). But even as the novel is rooted in a distinct time period, its cultural themes remain timeless and universal. The narrative is infused with wit, dark humor, and truth, offering a hauntingly realistic representation of a female artist's conflicts and subsequent breakdown and recovery. The enthusiastic early reception of Plath's

novel was driven not only by the unfortunate events of Plath's life but also by cultural phenomena relevant to American readers during the 1970s and 1980s, which occur as themes throughout the novel, such as the impact of the Cold War on American society, the limited and restrictive roles of women in the 1950s (and their influence on the women's movement), and the prevalence of mental health issues among women in the United States.

Plath, who described herself as "a political person," opens *The Bell Jar* in the summer of 1953, at the height of the Cold War:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers. . . . It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (1)

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a couple living in the Bronx, New York, were members of the American Communist Party. They were convicted of spying for the Soviet Union and passing on secrets about the atomic bomb, sentenced to death, and later executed. By introducing her novel with a reference to a controversial cultural event, Plath immediately adds external tension and cultural realism to the work.

As the *New York Times* put it in an opinion piece published on June 19, 2003, the fiftieth anniversary of their death, "The Rosenbergs' case still haunts American history, reminding us of the injustice that can be done when a nation gets caught up in hysteria." The Rosenbergs' trial was one of the most polarizing events in the early part of the Cold War, at a time fraught with "witch hunts" for Communist sympathizers. The "hysterical anti-Communism" prevalent at the time of the Rosenbergs' trial, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's conduct of congressional hearings on "un-American activities," interrogating artists, writers, and

filmmakers about their affiliations with the Communist Party, constituted a defining moment for Plath's generation (Nelson 24).

The extent of the Rosenbergs' involvement in the crimes they were accused of committing was hotly debated, and doubts still remain as to how much Ethel helped her husband to pass secrets about the atomic bomb to the Soviets. At the time of the trial, controversy and opposition flooded all media outlets. Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, and many others spoke out against the conviction of the Rosenbergs, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the Marxist existentialist philosopher and writer, deemed the trial "a legal lynching." But the protests were to no avail. Despite the outpouring of opposition to the Rosenbergs' execution, the couple was executed at sundown in the electric chair in Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York, on June 19, 1953.

Esther's opening monologue, in which she equates "being burned alive all along your nerves" with the "worst thing in the world," reveals her preoccupation with death and foreshadows the electroshock therapy she will undergo as treatment for the breakdown she suffers later. Plath also draws attention to the parallels between the Rosenbergs' execution through electrocution and the "shock treatments," or electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), that Esther is twice subjected to in the novel. The book includes a number of phrases found in Plath's earlier poems, such as her description of electroshock therapy, "darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard." The direct parallels that Plath draws between internal personal struggles and larger, cultural conflicts lend universality to the novel.

Plath uses the Rosenbergs' death, which she refers to on several occasions, to set the scene for her main themes. Ethel Rosenberg's full name was Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg. Plath's heroine is Esther Greenwood, and the similarity of the names draws a direct parallel between Esther and a woman many Americans believed had suffered a terrible injustice (Ashe 216). Ethel Rosenberg had two children and was often portrayed in the press as a bad mother. Plath uses her as a way of invoking the extreme pressures motherhood placed on women

living in the 1950s and of suggesting a climate in which being different or acting in a way that did not fit prescribed cultural norms was threatened with extreme punishment.

In *The Bell Jar*, “Plath equates sexual and personal politics with wider historical processes and breaks silences concerning women’s feelings of alienation and barrenness, and the negative, devouring aspects of motherhood” (Blain, Clements, and Grundy 860). At the time she wrote *The Bell Jar*, Plath had become acquainted at first hand with the domestic ideology of the postwar United States. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee in 1955, was the commencement speaker at Smith College in the year Plath graduated. In his address, he championed the “humble role of the housewife,” who could take part in the “greater issues of our day” by devoting herself to home, husband, and child rearing. According to Stevenson, the greatest contribution a woman could make to Cold War international politics was to cultivate the home. While images of domestic bliss and virtuous mothers were purveyed in magazines, television programming, political speeches, and advertising, Philip Wylie, in his book *Generation of Vipers* (published originally in 1942 and rereleased in 1955) was condemning “momism,” or overmothering, which, he argued, resulted in weak, emasculated men.

In the 1950s, women who wished to pursue intellectual or artistic pursuits were at a disadvantage. Women who showed intellectual interest in matters beyond the confines of the home were deemed unfeminine, and such subjects as home economics were taught to girls in high schools and colleges to prepare them for the duties of suburban wifehood. Women were rarely seen in positions of power. As Adrienne Rich recalls of her college days at Radcliffe, “I never saw a single woman on a lecture platform, or in front of a class. . . . Women students were simply not taken seriously” (238).

It is important to remember when reading *The Bell Jar* that in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, feminism was not in vogue. Although both decades were fairly prosperous, a woman’s social and

financial standing were determined not by the woman's own intrinsic merit but by her husband's occupation and income. During World War II, as a patriotic duty, six million women filled jobs that had historically been carried out by men, and images of such characters as Rosie the Riveter, the strong and capable woman doing her part for the war effort, were encouraged. After the war, however, a wave of antifeminism arose, sweeping away the idea of progressive femininity. During the 1950s, as Betty Friedan so aptly describes it in *The Feminine Mystique*, the hard-earned advantages won by the women of the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century—such as the rights to higher education, participation in production, professional careers, independent ownership of property, and the vote—were willingly relinquished. Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham's book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, published in 1947, introduced the negative image of "lost women"—independent women interested in science, art, and politics or engaged in careers outside the family circle. Lundberg and Farnham argued that women who work sacrifice their essential femininity. The image of the intelligent, independent "new woman" of the 1920s was replaced by the ideal of a vacuous, obedient housewife who lives contentedly within the walls of a pretty home in the suburbs that she cleans and cleans and cleans. Dr. Benjamin Spock, who wrote a popular column in *Ladies' Home Journal* about child rearing and published a child-rearing manual still popular today, *Baby and Child Care*, proposed that the government should subsidize housewives in order to discourage them from entering the workforce after having children.

During the 1950s, the average age for American women to marry dropped to twenty, the "youngest in the history of the country" (Showalter 391). The role of housewife became women's default identity. In Shirley Jackson's comic memoir *Life Among the Savages*, first published in 1953, she recalls an incident that illustrates this point. Arriving at the hospital to give birth to her third child, Jackson is asked her occupation by the admitting nurse:

“Writer,” I said.
“Housewife,” she said.
“Writer,” I said.
“I’ll just put down housewife,” she said. (68)

Feminist critics including Marjorie Perloff and Paula Bennett have analyzed *The Bell Jar* as a potent critique of the repression experienced by women during the 1950s. As Bennett states, “Plath’s *The Bell Jar* is a book about women. More specifically, it is a book about growing up as a woman in a culture that is fundamentally unfair and hypocritical in its inequality” (103). *The Bell Jar* stands as a vivid portrayal of one woman’s struggle within such a society and her attempt to assert control over her life. In the 1950s, women had few choices in regard to the trajectories of their lives. A woman’s choice between motherhood and a career is at the heart of Esther’s struggle, and motherhood is society’s preferred choice. As Friedan states in *The Feminine Mystique*, “Fulfillment as a woman had only one definition . . . the housewife-mother” (38). In 1950s America, women were encouraged to be sexually passive, dominated by men, and nurturing mothers. “A woman who failed to marry was not simply doomed to a life of dissatisfaction or frustration. Without a husband and children, she would become little short of a freak” (Bennett 102).

This lack of choice came at the cost of women’s mental health. A decline in mental health in suburban housewives is a major theme of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Examining a sample of twenty-eight women from an upper-income community, Friedan found that sixteen of the twenty-eight “were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquilizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized” (240-41). Doctors began to diagnose a syndrome in the 1950s called “housewife’s fatigue,” which was treated with tranquilizers.

Even at the outset of the novel, Esther feels out of control with the choices she is given after she wins a scholarship to Smith College and then a guest editorship at the *Ladies’ Day* fashion magazine:

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 here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. (2)

Esther, however, does not feel capable of steering anything, "not even [her]self" (2). Plath depicts Esther's inability to choose, or to choose without consequences, with a vivid image of a fig tree, which becomes a central metaphor in the novel. The image of the tree spins through Esther's mind as she is waiting at the United Nations building before she goes to dinner with Constantin, a U.N. interpreter:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor . . . and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)

Faced with choices in her life, Esther finds it impossible to choose one "fig" over another. As the novel reveals, Esther is told and shown repeatedly that her choices will have repercussions she cannot control. For example, she might choose to be both a poet and a mother, but as her boyfriend Buddy Willard reminds her, once she has children "she wouldn't want to write poems any more" (85).

When Esther looks to the choices made by the women she knows in

her life, she cannot find an acceptable model. Women she encounters embrace the role society encourages them to take as passive mothers, betraying themselves in the process. Examples of such characters include Esther's mother; Buddy's mother, Mrs. Willard; Esther's suburban housewife neighbor, Dodo; and her *Ladies' Day* intern colleague Betsy. Others, who follow their dreams to pursue careers at the expense of their femininity, include the *Ladies' Day* editor, Jay Cee; the unnamed visiting poet at Esther's college; and another intern colleague, Doreen. From her viewpoint, Esther watches her opportunities rot before her eyes as she returns to "the motherly breath of the suburbs" (126), finds out she has not made it into the writing class she had applied to, and subsequently suffers a mental breakdown.

Esther's paralysis and inability to choose derive from the fact that she does not have the choice to lead a happy and fulfilled life as an intellectual woman who may or may not want to have a family. It is significant that Plath sets Esther's breakdown in the suburbs, where, in the 1950s, many American women became isolated as housewives and mothers. Lewis Mumford calls the suburbs "an asylum for the preservation of illusion" and describes them as steeped in "isolation" (494, 490). In the 1950s, suburban housewives stood at the center of that illusion, in an isolated vacuum. When Esther steps off the train from New York, she is confronted not only with her failure to make it into the writing class but also with an overwhelming sense of female isolation. "It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station wagons and tennis rackets and dogs and babies. A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything like death" (126-27). When Esther gets into the car with her mother, she feels, like so many other women before her, that she has just been handed a life sentence in the prison of the suburbs.

The Bell Jar is filled with examples of women paying for their unfeminine appetites and sexuality, and vomiting is used as a figure for both attraction and disgust. After a *Ladies' Day* luncheon, the interns pay for the food they have eaten with a terrible bout of uncontrollable sickness. When her hospital companion, Joan Gilling, tells Esther she

likes her, Esther replies, “Frankly, Joan, you make me puke.” Esther is finally purged of her unnatural and un-American behaviors through electroshock treatment, a punishment that Plath equates in the novel with Ethel Rosenberg’s execution based on questionable evidence. At the close of the novel Esther has survived (as evidenced by her small child playing with the starfish from a pair of *Ladies’ Day*-era sunglasses); but she has survived only because her double, Joan, has hanged herself from a tree, an event that we can only associate with Plath’s image of the fig tree. In the end, Esther leaves the institution “patched, retreaded, and [doctor] approved,” but the bell jar and its “stifling distortions” still threaten to descend upon her life.

In today’s world, where women have more say as to the combination of roles they wish to pursue, including career, wife, and mother, how does a text such as *The Bell Jar* retain its force? It does so much as other coming-of-age novels, including *The Catcher in the Rye*, remain relevant. By linking Esther’s personal struggles to larger cultural themes and events, Plath paints an enduring portrait of a young girl coming of age in tumultuous times. In post-9/11 America, the threat of attack, and the threat of a common, often hidden enemy, is as pervasive as the threat of Communism for the readers of Plath’s novel in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Therefore, it is not difficult to relate to Plath’s inclusion of Cold War events such as the Rosenberg trial and execution and the controversy that surrounded them. We still live in a society plagued by materialism, where American leaders exhort the populace to buy products as a sign of patriotism. And while women’s choices have evolved over the past few decades, the effects that the choice of motherhood can have on a woman’s pursuit of a career and her life in general continue to constitute an important issue. Because of the relevance of these themes in today’s society and Plath’s thematic structure, tying prevalent cultural events with a personal coming-of-age story, *The Bell Jar* remains a powerful, iconic text avidly read by a variety of audiences. Could there not be in today’s society a misunderstood individual, like Esther Greenwood, who goes against the grain of

society, who isn't satisfied with the choices given to her by her culture, and, as a result of these irresolvable choices, faces a mental breakdown?

Notes

1. In 1973, Plath's roommate during this time, Nancy Hunter Steiner, published the memoir *A Closer Look at Ariel*, which documents Steiner's perspective on events that took place during this year and relates those events to what appears in *The Bell Jar* and in Plath's poems in *Ariel*.

2. Aurelia Plath's letter is often reprinted in editions of *The Bell Jar* as part of "The Bell Jar and the Life of Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," by Lois Ames. In a 1979 interview on the occasion of the opening of a play based on the collection of her daughter's letters she had published in 1975 (both titled *Letters Home*), Aurelia Plath spoke with Nan Robertson of the *New York Times*: "'When *The Bell Jar* came out in 1971, it became a very hard time for me,' Mrs. Plath said. 'It was accepted as an autobiography, which it wasn't. Sylvia manipulated it very skillfully. She invented, fused, imagined. She made an artistic whole that read as truth itself. That's why I had to have Sylvia speak in her truest voice, which I know comes through in these letters.'"

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