

## ANALYSIS

### *The Bell Jar* (1963)



Sylvia Plath

(1932-1963)

“Sylvia Plath’s only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963) is perhaps the most compelling and controlled account of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction. That Sylvia Plath subsequently became famous as a poet, and that the autobiographical basis for her one novel is well-established, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that it is a very distinguished American novel in its own right. The heroine, Esther Greenwood, is beset by feelings of detachment and estrangement from reality which make her a representative contemporary character. Esther has won a fashion magazine contest and visits New York as part of the prize. But though in the crowded clangorous city, she is not of it. She feels like a hole in the ground, like a negative of a person, an absence instead of a presence, a silence instead of a communicant. The things and events of New York press upon her, but without significance. Her numbness and estrangement from reality bring her to a recognizable sort of paralysis—mapless and motiveless.

When she looks at the features of a face in a photograph they melt away, just as the words in a book she reads start to flow past making no impression on the ‘glassy surface’ of her brain. She finds it difficult to perceive any meaningful patterns in reality, a failure of gestalt which empties perception of significance, reducing vision to mere dots and language to sounds. That glassy surface is really the bell jar inside which she sits, through which she perceives the world. To see the world through glass is to register signs without gathering meanings, and Plath’s own style with its clear yet remote documentation of the strangeness of the world outside the glass, is a perfect bell-jar style. After her breakdown and suicide attempt, in the hospital her mind continues to disengage itself from the context of the moment. ‘Every time I tried to concentrate, my mind glided off, like a skater, into a large empty space, and pirouetted there, absently.’ This is a beautiful image for that inclination to escape into some private space away from the pressure of the moment which is recurrent in American literature. She is the sealed-off spectator, telling herself ‘I am an observer.’

The fact that she is in New York to work for a fashion magazine only heightens her sense of unreality, and it is no idle gesture that one night she climbs to the parapet of her hotel and throws away all the clothes she has been given. A similar inclination to renounce the impositions of the external world is detectable in her use of the hot bath as a cure for her feelings of claustrophobia in New York. It makes her feel that everything is ‘dissolving,’ and that the acquired layers of the day are falling away. (This is another example of the delights and reliefs connected with ‘flowing.’) After a hot bath she feels like a new baby, and the whole private ritual is rather like a Reichian dissolving of acquired covers to rediscover the buried child in

the self. There are endless references to Esther looking in mirrors and seeing peering out from the prison of the glass an increasingly strange and unrecognizable face in various states of mutilation and deterioration. Finally she can only think that the mirror is a picture of someone else: her alienation from her visible self has become complete.

But the suicide attempt is the prelude to a rediscovery of self expedited by electric-shock treatment in an institution. And this recovery of self is experienced as a lifting of the bell jar. 'I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.' The point is that the person in the bell jar is imprisoned in the airless landscape of his own mind and memory, with no chance of any 'circulating air.' 'To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.' But the stuffy air inside the bell jar is the air of self not world. (And there is an implication in the book that 'ordinary' people are 'under bell jars of a sort.') So freedom for Esther consists of getting out of the claustrophobic prison of her own detached self—not just out of the institution, though that may seem to be the most visible prison, but out of the bell jar. The book ends with the experience of a second birth and the hope of a new life. But Esther cannot be sure that, wherever she goes, 'the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again.' And the subsequent suicide of her brilliant author all too grimly underlines the fragility of this fictional resolution. Even so it is a resolution very common in recent American fiction—a concluding intention to somehow get out of the bell jar and back into the world.

With the sort of receding of self away from the usual contacts with the external world, which is the beginning of her breakdown, goes a fairly obvious death wish. All the imagery of the book suggests that Esther envisages that death would be an occasion of rebirth at the same time. When she is skiing she plunges down the great slope with reckless delight: 'People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still white point at the end of it...the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly.' When she does try to commit suicide, the action is also experienced as a return to a dark, comfortable, womblike retreat—in fact she does creep into a hidden hole in a cellar and takes sleeping pills. The subsequent experience echoes the precipitous feeling of her skiing—'I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth.' In Esther's case she does finally come out at that white point at the end of the tunnel, so that the almost-death is turned into a kind of second birth. But for other characters in other books who also make their retreats from the world, the tunnel often proves to yield no white light at the end of it."

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"Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* appears to slide off Salinger in several ways; but not solely because, as some critics have suggested, her Esther Greenwood seems like a female Holden Caulfield. More, she is linked to Salinger by virtue of their ability to juxtapose highs and lows in rapid succession, their insight into how close one's sense of achievement is to one's end. Life in both is often a disguise for a very sudden death, which has already taken place without the individual knowing it.

*The Bell Jar* (published in England in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, in America in 1971) reaches for significance Plath is unable to deliver on. She is the tragedian of short bursts—intermixing death with lyric poetry—not of the longer haul. She opens the novel, which is mainly retrospective, with the 'quiet, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs.' [Communist spies who gave U.S. atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union but were seen as victims by liberals] She says she is stupid about electrocutions, but she is not stupid about forms of death, suicidal death. For the latter sections of the novel are bathed in suicides, sequences of them, either thought about (as wrist slashing or jumping from a speeding car) or else actual attempts, as in the one that almost succeeded. In that, she swallowed fifty pills and hid, fetuslike, in a breezeway in her mother's basement. Her mother, doing the laundry, heard groans and was able to get her help in time. As for electrocutions, Esther Greenwood experiences something similar; she undergoes shock treatment on two separate occasions, and on the first, unprepared for it, she almost parallels what the Rosenbergs must have felt.

The latter sections, with the suicides, the shock treatments, the institutionalizations, are considerably at variance with the earlier segments. We understand that Esther has been driving herself, that she has felt little personal satisfaction, that there were unexamined areas of herself which were potentially explosive, that she was too passive. Also, we understand she was out of touch with whatever she was, that her feminine side was crushed in her attempts to make her way in a man's world; that all her efforts were judged by her role as a woman in that world. Nevertheless, her leap into suicide efforts is insufficiently prepared for. Their context is *suicide itself*, not the young woman attempting it. This is an important distinction, because if it is valid, efforts to claim more for the book are weakened. Then the book falls back into imitation Salinger, a weak link in that growing up subgenre.

Plath strives to intensify the narrative, to lay the groundwork for self-destruction and destruction. The importance of the title is there, the bell jar as container of Esther's ambience, the bell jar as lid, as a sense of the death awaiting her, her coffin. The jar with the embryo babies is introduced when Buddy Willard shows her around his hospital. These embryos are forms, entombed in glass, which didn't make it, although the last one in the sequence looks as if it developed into a fetus. Esther perceives herself mirrored in those shapes, analogous to the role she chose to play in her mother's basement breezeway. As a multiple symbol, the bell jar is apt; but even here, Plath does not extend it. Implied in her character is a larger familial and social failure than Plath can develop. If she could have, that shift into tragedy from the earlier parts of the novel would have been sequential, not a leap.

We are left, then, with a suicidal Holden. We seem poised to understand Esther, but broader contexts are missing. Instead, Plath goes for laughs. Puking is a source of fun, or male genitals. We never comprehend the madness that will define her efforts to understand the world around her. Madness is at one level her exploration of what is still left for her to do, in a world that has defined her boundaries. Madness is revolt, in the Laingian sense of a personal reaction to social lunacy. What we miss in the novel...those coordinates which would have allowed Plath to make that huge leap from a 'mad world' to true personal madness. The unevenness results from a crucial division between elements: those associated with the Holden-Salinger syndrome and those connected to the tragic element that lies in marginality, passivity, even innocence."

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Michael Hollister (2015)