

---

**Review: The Bell Jar (1963) – Sylvia Plath**

---

**Hassan Nassif Jassim**

Ministry of High Education, Al-Qasim Green University, Iraq

---

Paper Received on 18-01-2025, Accepted on 15-02-2025  
Published on 16-02-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.1.329

---

**Introduction**

Sylvia Plath was one of the many women writers who discussed psychological alienation in their novels and short stories. 'The Bell Jar' was unique because of the honesty and directness with which it presented thoughts and emotions. Plath's novel chronicled the life of Esther Greenwood, a college student who attempted to take her life. Taking into account the autobiographical details, we can assume that Plath wrote a book based on many lived experiences. It is suggested that Plath's experiences led to her exclusion from a community in which power was held in the hands of men who utilized women as mental health tools in many situations, and in the novel, women faced degrading sexual double standards. Plath's novel is graphically violent and sends mixed signals to the reader about what mental wellness actually is. One of the subthemes in the novel, violence, was discovered as both a character attribute and a theme.

While the exciting part of reading this thematic material was to see the range of emotion and action in the book demonstrated by the various characters, I also planned to look for evidence of character development as a result of their experiences. My focus was on Esther and her physical and psychological level of development. 'The Bell Jar' is seen as a forerunner to the explosion of feminist literature representing female alienation and mental wellness issues in literature. Furthermore, during this time period, the surrealistic qualities in fiction shifted into the inner self in a conscious digression of subjectivity that could take many different forms, and the voices of Plath's contemporaries gave her the freedom to write because it suggested to her that being private and autobiographical was not necessarily belittling.

**Background of Sylvia Plath**

Sylvia Plath was an American poet, novelist, and short-story writer. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, she grew up in Winthrop, Boston, and attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Plath published her first poem when she was eight years old. Sivyvy, as she was called by her family and friends, was taught writing by

---

her mother, and she published her first story when she was eight and her first poem when she was only ten. She grew up with the lore of Abraham Lincoln, who was born in the next community of South Shore, and the legend of losing Massachusetts Bay into the Atlantic Ocean. Plath's depression and incipient pathology, the tumultuous relationships with her young father, a college professor who died when Sylvia was eight, her preoccupation with her ethnic background, her sexual aggression, and evening confrontations with male students while still in high school, all became material for her later writing. As much as her descent into mental pathology, her survival and intellectual insight into mental disorder became obsession and the center of her art.

After a long battle with depression, a period of serious self-injury, and a bitter disillusionment with her unfeeling and opportunistic psychiatrist, Plath committed suicide by asphyxiation from natural gas in her kitchen while at the same time sealing the rooms of her sleeping children in order to spare them the fate of living with the terrible memories of youth and insanity that had haunted her. At the time of her death, Plath had been rejected by approximately 40 publishing houses and journals. Except for one story and several poems, all of her writing had been published posthumously. Plath was drawn into a lofty literary crowd at a less than two-week house party in which she stepped, the only unwashed guest among them, into the pantheon of the New York literary elite. She subsequently wrote an autobiographical novel after her return to England, where it was initially published under a pseudonym. The novel deals in part with the difficulties of womanhood in its era, the cultural schizophrenia of the upwardly mobile, and the effects of madness in 1950s America. From the beginning of the publishing process to the completion of the book in its final form, the novel was shaped, edited, and given final proof by her English husband, in collusion with her American mother, who had previously collaborated in the career of the young and beautiful writer in America.

#### **Context of 'The Bell Jar'**

The Bell Jar was first published in 1963, in the United States. By this time, attitudes towards mental illness had begun to shift after the de-institutionalization process in the late 1940s and into the 1950s; but the England of The Bell Jar was fiercely conservative in its attitudes, still weighted heavily with stigma, and relaxed about committing someone to a mental hospital. The narrator, Esther Greenwood, wrestles with what she considers to be a society-imposed shame that sees her as one step away from total lunacy (or, indeed, from the bell jar she evocatively describes).

---

Depression comes and goes throughout her life but is particularly repressive in 1962. The novel was also something of a take on the feminist movement of the time, which becomes a silent subtext to the action. Thus, on the one hand, the novel speaks very personally to the experiences and observations of a slowly downward-spiraling youngster. On the other, it is also a comment on American life in the 1950s, on America's gender roles and expectations. The Bell Jar rings with discord, and this is something readers should keep in mind – this is the author vs. the norm, if you like. She was an outsider and a writer, and in *The Bell Jar* she explains some of the psychological symptoms she learned as a child growing up in middle America – the soul-sucking irrelevances, the disliking of distraction. It is entirely autobiographical, and yet told in the third person. Certainly, it is full of naturalist-like detail, and to miss any would be a folly. As much as it is the story of a disenfranchised youth dealing with adult work as she starts her life out, it is an analysis of moral and mental decay. It is, really, something of an idealized version of 'What Is Wrong with Everyone and How Can We Fix It?' On the contrary, the success would have come from 'everyone' not at all enjoying the message. It takes a mad pill to see a mad world in all its truth. Within the three years before she published *The Bell Jar*, there had been three suicide attempts. The day of its publication, in January of 1963, was the day she also ordered her poetry destroyed. Reaction to the book critically was wildly varied.

### **Themes and Motifs**

One of the most prominent themes of 'The Bell Jar' is the mental health of the protagonist. There are several instances throughout the novel that imply that Esther Greenwood is struggling with rigid societal norms, but it quickly becomes clear that she has some deeply ingrained psychological issues that go beyond her ambivalence about societal expectations. The theme of identity reappears time and time again in 'The Bell Jar.' Esther's struggle to define who she is in relation to her career and marriage advises the reader of the importance of individuality in the world of the novel. Characters who do not know who they truly are outside of the societal norm tend to suffer.

### **Mental Health and Identity**

One of the most prevalent themes in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* is mental illness, depicted through various interpretations. At the surface, the novel offers a psychological and disturbing portrayal of a young woman's breakdown. The protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, provides a narrative of falling into a deep depression, attempting suicide, and her subsequent recovery. However, deeper

---

analysis can support a new perspective beyond this trauma narrative. Feminist readings of the text would instead see Esther's mental illness as a reflection of larger social anxieties and a limitation of the female consciousness during the 1950s. This critical response explores how Esther's depression causes a desolation that further isolates her and creates a fragmentation of self. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, the focus is from the perspective of Esther Greenwood, who shares a vivid account of falling from normality into depression, stemming from a loss of identity. Witnessing Esther's enlightening depression, from within her own mind and soul, brings out the complexity of pathology. Esther's trauma is related to a crisis of representation, where the power of patriarchal symbols intersects with individual experience. The narrative is told in a first-person perspective reflecting the character's own voice and private musings, which offers a realistic and raw presentation of her struggle, illness, and gender alienation. Consequently, we are witness to the process of fragmentation Esther experiences as a part of her treatment process. Addressing part of the self, which is a fragmented persona, that Dr. Gordon and Dr. Nolan fail to address. Reflecting the façade of the fragmented feminine persona that masks Esther's true self. The two aspects of women conflict in their subjectivity; the woman of interiority is confined by her gender submission, victimized, while the other woman, her persona, hides the torment she is experiencing within her spirit. Dr. Gordon and Dr. Nolan both recognize and fail to address the victimized woman, illustrating how the healing process within a patriarchal society is flawed, alongside its expectation of women.

### **Gender Roles**

The significance of gender roles in *The Bell Jar* has been acknowledged by a range of feminist literary critics. The novel uniquely engages with the "strict model of femininity to which Esther is held throughout the novel," and this analysis shines a light on traditional and oppressive gender roles. Authors of the 1950s and 60s were expected to accept traditional gender roles, and societal expectations severely impacted women of the time. The novel reflects these tensions associated with gender roles, and women face frequent and all-consuming decisions regarding future spouses and possible mother roles. From the opening pages of Plath's novel, its narrator, Esther Greenwood, rejects typical norms about women and women's roles, goals, and futures.

The depiction of society and women's relationships demonstrates a broader complexity of female identity. In the novel, women stick together to form superficial

---

and restrictive cliques that necessarily limit other girls' socialization and mobility options. Importantly, these friendships tend to be very competitive. Finally, while the potential to rebel exists within the words and thoughts of many other influential female nonfiction writers of the time, such a dramatic movement could scarcely occur within the narrative arc of their writing. In the latter part of the novel, knowledge about the feminist movement assures that Esther's transformation is, in fact, about rebellion from traditional gender roles. In this sense, *The Bell Jar* may be viewed as deeply engaged with society in the 1950s and 60s.

### **Character Analysis**

Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist, is a complex character who serves as a lens through which themes of identity and mental health are explored. She famously struggles with notions of self-realization, spending the majority of the novel trying to live up to societal expectations of both getting married and establishing a career. She alienates herself from both paths ultimately because of their systems of control and ends up rejecting them. During the course of her time in New York City, Esther unsuccessfully tries to take the form of other women so she can have an identity that she might be content in. This futile experiment embitters her more. She now knows she can never become a woman like Doreen, so she discards the possibility altogether. By the end of *The Bell Jar*, she becomes "free" of notions of love and sexuality; she does not want them. Instead, she becomes further interested in embodying a male role. She tries to break into all-male spaces, takes on a typically male profession, drives a car, etc. There is a possibility that she takes on the restricted behaviors attributed to men to escape the stereotypes about women as emotional and uncontrollable portrayed earlier in the novel.

Esther's time in New York City was a crucial aspect of her mental breakdown. Chicago makes Esther happy because women are free and independent there, but she starts to change once she arrives in New York. She is overwhelmed by the men there and feels isolated. Esther's perception of Doreen and Betsy initially profiles them as opposites; Doreen is outgoing and confident, Betsy is shy and demure. Betsy starts to develop into a quiet, intelligent woman who strives above all else to do what is expected of women. Meanwhile, Doreen starts to lose all enthusiasm and joy and replaces it with a nervous, panicky outlook. Betsy wants what Doreen has, and it drives her mad to contemplate that she might "end up like Doreen." The mechanics of her interactions with Doreen suggest that, while Esther and Betsy Greenwood and

---

Fran Gaddy's traumas were not limited to social isolation, this significant aspect of women's life was an important contributor to their mental health problems.

**Esther Greenwood**

From the very beginning of *The Bell Jar*, Esther appears to be a bright and ambitious young woman. She is earning top marks in school and already has an impressive writing opportunity under her belt, but completely unbeknownst to her peers, nothing is going well on the inside. This duality of character makes Esther a very intriguing subject of literary exploration, so much so that many readers and literary critics alike have explored this very aspect of her psychological and emotional journey. The descent into madness that Esther experiences in the novel practically screams retrospective analysis, where it is perfectly clear why outwardly impressive young men and women were committing suicide or dying from self-inflicted wounds, even the ones who were seemingly successful, beautiful, and rich. Women in American society from the end of the Second World War to the nascent beginnings of the third wave of feminism were not expected to have ambitions, to have goals, to be successful, something that has been thoroughly examined, deconstructing American society in this era through the lens of what it meant to live as an average American woman.

The *Bell Jar* is most often categorized as a first-person narrative containing autobiographical elements which takes the reader on a journey of internal thought and emotional exploration, almost as though Esther herself is speaking to the reader in a private conversation as one would have with a friend under the radar of regular society. Much has been said about the character of Esther Greenwood as she stands in the pages of the book, and then as she looks back at herself, submerged in the hardship of her early life. Coming-of-age novels are filled to the brim with naive characters who struggle to understand who they are in the face of what society expects them to be, so it is not surprising that characters similar in construct to that of Esther are often present. For a time, Esther manages to carve out a place for herself in the confusion of her friends' hospital rooms, establishing good relationships and fleeing from those that would contain and control her, though of course in the end she ends up attempting to flee from everything. The fact that Esther is so clear-minded when everything is behind her, after she has buried everyone and the worst has happened, makes it clear from the beginning and throughout the rest of *The Bell Jar* that the narrator in the text is not in a fragile mental or emotional condition for the reader's

---

sake alone, but that without the reader and without their ears to hear, Esther is profoundly lost within herself.

### **Doreen and Betsy**

In her polygamist tasks, Heda Kovaly is quoted expressing the question that is playing again and again: "Why do they not get it straight away and just kill them?" Having only read a semi-autobiographical novel is similar to behaving in a nearly identical manner. At first sight, Doreen seems contradictory to Betsy, an original rebellious woman who has taken a pill to stay slim each day and is gazing in a mirror as she pokes her head out of the apartment window. "I had not slept for practically three nights," Betsy said softly. "I sleep almost every night," Doreen said, calm and straightforward, entering the room.

Doreen's sexual promiscuity is really straightforward. She has previously confided that she is retained every weekend by someone else and gives herself out as selfish: she won't sleep with anyone at places with less than four stars. "I don't like the girls from here at school," Betsy tells Esther. They've thrown their hooks into everything, but all they're getting is boring boys who just want to fantasize with them so they can marry them. They gave up their virginity, then "I felt weak and waited to see the... I ended up knowing some men fragments that would continue. I guess I'm good at that." Betsy does not genuinely think Esther's a good woman. "Just set aside. Go somewhere." Betsy's femininity is understood, according to Esther. Doreen would despise either a solitary kiss or a romantic engagement. "If you're determined to stay in, it's decent and wrong. Keep in mind that there is significantly less fresh air and junk up there." Everyone has been attracted to Esther or cooked but "locked up in a rubber room." Betsy genuinely worries about her: "I'm worried that, just as you don't know how to fight anymore, just as you believe you're in the clear, if you continue down a season, you'll reach the bottom again."

### **Literary Style**

Sylvia Plath's only attempt to tell a story through fiction, with a character described as neither her nor anybody else, presents from the outset a literary style that is not her consummate self in any way. *The Bell Jar* is, in fact, deeply uniform in its narrative voice and cadence of speech; the way Esther Greenwood thinks is the way Plath narrates. Painfully autobiographical without anyone needing to add it or know it, so intimate in speech and phrasing, it remains a constant flow of scintillating narrative. The choice of footnotes at the end of the novel can have different explanations, but the fact that they can be related may allude to the same narrator.

---

This is yet a third piece of evidence of the way Plath distinguishes time in *The Bell Jar* and yet erases boundaries.

Plath's typical way of engaging with geographical places is also extremely poetic and intimately symbolic. In a way, *The Bell Jar* is full of characters that wind up constrained, volatile, or fragile. There is a constant atmospheric, symbol-ridden, and power-packed presence in the imagery portrayed, adding to the emotive landscape against which Esther's and Plath's struggle unfolds. The prose in general is also a highly emotional and intense endeavor that doesn't cease to alternate in the same way that most would call it attenuative in tone; but the point is that it gets started again. The presence of poetry in *The Bell Jar* is not a mere exercise in the division between genres, but rather an abundantly historical and original touch that adds layers to Plath's own text, as well as to the complex class of narrative texts in general.

### **Symbolism and Imagery**

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* is a semi-biographical account of a bright young woman suffering from depression. The novel offers a poignant depiction of one woman's struggle with mental illness, capturing her experiences as they unfold. This section will focus on an exploration of the novel's symbolism and imagery, considering how these techniques deepen the story's meaning, reveal emotions, and develop characters. Symbolism As the novel's title, *The Bell Jar* is a significant symbol of confinement and suffocation. Indeed, the bell jar represents a dense and claustrophobic environment, too opaque to allow any air or breath for Esther. Moreover, the bell jar stands out as a transparent, half-visible object that amplifies everything beneath it. Imagery A lot of imagery surrounds Esther regarding sticking her head in ovens, getting drunk at parties, and sleeping with strangers. A recurring living-death and grave imagery resonates with the idea of death within life and a hero's inner emptiness. There is a feigned disinterest in nature but value is assigned to the contention established by the images of nature that surround Esther. Instead of critiquing or rejecting nature, the unsettling images are indicative of Esther's psychological torture as a woman in a patriarchal society. Several images of women: drowning, hung, or disembodied, can be located in the novel to illuminate Esther's plight. Signs of the protagonist's volatility are conveyed through the employment of light and dark imagery, illustrating her highs and lows – the ultimate state of despair and the enduring possibility of hope. Although most critics admire the vivid imagery in the novel, they are not in any way mutually exclusive. There must be an emotional



---

grounding running beneath them, intensified by their impact, which renders the characters more comprehensible to the readers.

### **Narrative Techniques**

From the first-person perspective, Plath kept her protagonists' thoughts and feelings central, so that the reader becomes part of Esther's struggle. This strategy lets readers feel close to Esther and understand the anger, confusion, and frustration regarding her situation and the fight for her recovery. Furthermore, Plath created a fluid narrative style. Esther's storyline moves between past and present, just as memory does. This approach highlights the nature of memory, making readers understand how memories project onto the present. Therefore, this technique connects the novel to her therapy and shows the haunting past that Esther cannot escape.

The dialogue further reveals character, such as the performance of societal expectations and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Plath utilized surreal moments, adding an inventive twist to her perspective. When Esther confronted her challenge with death due to her fear of electrocution, she experiences a vision in the asylum. The lack of context for the image, and how odd the appearance of the description is, creates a drawing compulsion and surprise, making the reader uncomfortable and unsure of the fictional space she is in. Ultimately, the use of these techniques is effective. What she does is breathe life into her novel and bring readers into a personal story that reverberates on a variety of levels.

### **Critical Reception and Legacy**

Initially, *The Bell Jar* was met with mixed reviews and sold poorly, particularly in the UK. Like Plath herself, the novel was often characterized as confessional or solipsistic, focusing on Esther's personal plights at the exclusion of anyone else. Since Plath's suicide, however, the trajectory of her critical reception has shifted. The circumstances of her life have given readers and scholars alike license to read her entire oeuvre, both poetry and prose, within the context of her mental illness. While this has led to disparities in her posthumously published version of *The Bell Jar* between the UK and US, these more sympathetic readings have also broadened the focus of Plath scholarship from the self-obsession of the 1970s to include women's roles more generally. Scholars trace Plath's themes of alienation, ambivalence toward traditional gender roles, desire for professional fulfillment, and the struggle between biology and the self in their critical analyses.

## Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF),Vol-10,Issue-1(Jan-Mar),2025  
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),  
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

---

Despite the time of its publication, which might suggest that *The Bell Jar* falls into the purview of New Literature studies as an artifact of postwar America, *The Bell Jar* is used in several different fields today. While it has had an impact on literary theory and criticism, it is also one of the first glimpses most people in the US have of the psychic trauma and subtle changes in the self that were the goal in a study in which Jesus Christs were placed in a hospital together so that the differences in their concepts of self would conflict and change. Finally, as the newly launched field of women's studies began discussing topics like mental illness in women, the connection between bisexuality and modern femininity, and the need to redefine gender, these discoveries by women at the time of Plath's death emphasized modern relevance and kindled a push for acceptance of feminist studies in college. Scholars of the novel who attend predominantly to the mental health themes are often concerned with the ways in which "Esther's search for identity and self-knowledge" is slighted by the treatments she undergoes, and these could be considered attackers who contribute to the literary analysis.

### Reference

Plath, S. (1972). *The Bell Jar*.(1963). Faber & Faber.

<p><b>Jassim, Hassan Nassif.</b> "Review: <i>The Bell Jar</i> (1963) – Sylvia Plath." <i>Research Journal of English (RJOE)</i>, vol. 10, no. 1, 2025, pp. 330-339, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.1.339.</p>
--