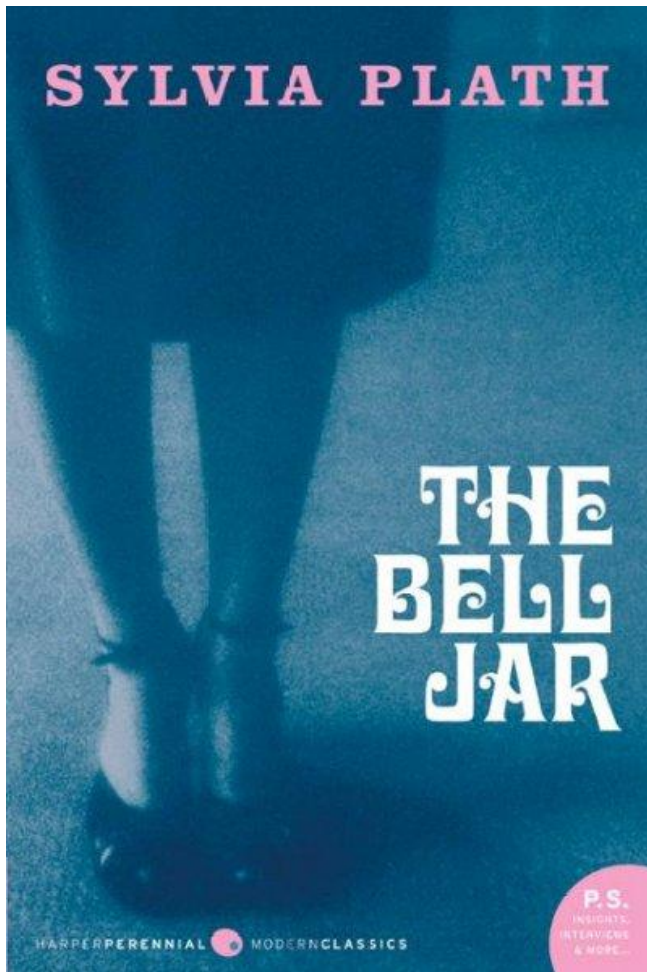


## About the book...



*The Bell Jar* chronicles the crack-up of Esther Greenwood: brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful, but slowly going under — maybe for the last time. Sylvia Plath masterfully draws the reader into Esther's breakdown with such intensity that Esther's insanity becomes completely real and even rational, as probable and accessible an experience as going to the movies. Such deep penetration into the dark and harrowing corners of the psyche is an extraordinary accomplishment and has made *The Bell Jar* a haunting American classic.

## About the author...



Now famous for her ritual flirtations with death, Sylvia Plath has emerged as a significant figure in contemporary American literature in the two and a half decades since her suicide on 11 February 1963. Her reputation as an accomplished and versatile author has developed as a response to the posthumous publication of the bulk of her work. A so-called modern confessional writer because of her open use of autobiographical material, Plath has been critically recognized for the intense focus of emotion in her art, especially in the crown jewel of her poetry collections *Ariel* (1965), written in the last six months of her life, and in her modern rite-of-passage novel *The Bell Jar* (as Victoria Lucas, 1963).

In her relatively brief but highly productive career, she created--and is popularly remembered for--a complex, nearly mystical, and personal body of poetry that has struck a note of universality among contemporary readers. In her typically fastidious fashion, Plath had early set herself the task of mastering the techniques of poets of Western literature. Having

completed that self-imposed apprenticeship through her disciplined experimentation with such forms as the villanelle and the Petrarchan sonnet in the period before 1956, she turned to a new exploration of her own voice. That effort culminated in the poems that comprise the bulk of her first published collection *The Colossus* (1960). Between the publication of that volume and her death, Plath wrote the mature work for which she is best known; at its best it is fiercely ironic, even comedic, intensely subjective, often ritualistic, and nearly always painful. Despite her efforts and successes as a poet, she herself once called poetry "an evasion from the real job of writing prose," and one of the professional tasks she set herself was to write clear "objective" narratives. It is not surprising, therefore, that the publication of works by Plath in the 1980s shows her to have been a prolific diarist, short story writer, and budding essayist who aspired to become a popular, highly paid, magazine-style short story writer and travel journalist.

Sylvia Plath." *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography: The New Consciousness, 1941-1968*. Gale Research, 1987.

## Reviews

### *Kirkus Reviews*

It is difficult to read Sylvia Plath's novel (which appeared in England under a pseudonym in the year of her death, 1963) with any degree of objectivity since it deals with her earlier breakdown and suicide attempt. The telltale lesions are everywhere and in the hindsight of what has happened, the experience of the bell jar ("To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream") becomes even more fateful. Certainly any marginal illusion of fiction is nullified. When first met Esther is a naive nineteen-year-old who reads and writes poetry, who remembers with some irritation the first boy she really dated at college, and who comes to New York for a few weeks in the summer of her junior year having won one of those magazine apprenticeship awards. Esther broods over the Rosenbergs' electrocution (some of Miss Plath's parallels are too obvious to even be justified as symbols); she overeats; she becomes immobilized in indecision and returns home to lie in bed and never sleep. After one or two visits with a non-verbal psychiatrist who gives her shock treatment, she attempts suicide and the rest of the account deals with her institutionalization and an occasional line ("A heavy naughtiness pricked through my veins") offends, but there's some remarkable writing with a straightforward and irreducible simplicity: "The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence." There is no mistaking or evading the airless suspension of life within the bell jar.

## Discussion questions ([www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com))

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?
10. Esther bluntly tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother. What is Mrs. Greenwood's role in Esther's life and in the novel? Is Esther just in her presentation of and attitude toward her mother?

### **Read-alikes:**

*The Hours* by Michael Cunningham

Virginia Woolf is brought back to life in an intertwining of her story with those of two more contemporary women. In Woolf's life, she awakens one morning in London in 1923 with a dream that will become Mrs. Dalloway. In the present, Clarissa Vaughan is planning a party in Greenwich Village for her oldest love, a poet dying from AIDS. And in Los Angeles in 1949, Laura Brown is pregnant and unsettled, trying to prepare for her husband's birthday, but wanting nothing more than to sit and read Woolf. -- NoveList

*The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing

The experiences of two women provide the framework for an intense literary study of liberated womanhood, in a new edition--which includes an author biography and publication history--of a novel originally published in 1962. – NoveList

*Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* by Kate Moses

A fictional account of the last months of Sylvia Plath's life and the painful creation of her Ariel poems finds her moving with her two children to London after divorcing Ted Hughes, who works to remind her about happier times. – NoveList

*Hangsaman* by Shirley Jackson

In this semi-autobiographical novel, Shirley Jackson explores the life of seventeen-year-old Natalie Waite. Living in the shadow of and with the strict demands of her intellectual father, Natalie undergoes a severe trauma in the few weeks before she is to set off for college. The remainder of the novel follows Natalie's unsuccessful attempts to maintain her mental balance and avoid schizophrenia in the face of that event, during a difficult transition to college. – What Do I Read Next?

**Watch-alikes:**

**Sylvia** – dir. Christine Jeffs, 2003

Beginning in England in 1956, the film depicts American poet Sylvia (Gwyneth Paltrow)--who has a history of depression and suicide attempts--attending Cambridge University on a Fulbright Scholarship. While at a party, she meets Ted (Daniel Craig), a dashing student and fellow poet. The chemistry between them is electric, and they become immediately inseparable, their mutual love of verse the glue that holds them together. But Sylvia's success in her art gives way to jealous madness as other women lavish their attentions on Ted. Her subsequent descent into the deepest of depressions leads to her suicide in 1962. In this stirring film, Paltrow hits a high note in her career with her portrayal of Sylvia.

**The Hours** – dir. Stephen Daldry, 2002

Spanning three different eras, during one day, the film focuses on the parallel lives of three women joined in their depression, alienation, and search for love. Nicole Kidman is the tortured writer Virginia Woolf, whose ongoing battle with mental illness eventually led to her tragic suicide in 1941. The film begins with the moment of her suicide and flashes back on her life and work as she crafted her most memorable character, Clarissa Dalloway, in 1923.

**Winter Passing** – dir. Adam Rapp, 2005

Adam Rapp makes his impressive feature film directorial debut with WINTER PASSING, an intimate, often bleak, but ultimately hopeful film about the importance of family, however dysfunctional. Zooey Deschanel carries the movie as Reese Holdin, a sullen, depressed, self-mutilating actress struggling to stay afloat in New York. When an aggressive editor (Amy Madigan) offers her a fat check in exchange for the love letters written by her famous writer parents, she returns to her father's Michigan farm in search of a payday, but instead finds herself trying to connect with her estranged father (Ed Harris), as well as the odd surrogate family he's assembled for himself.