

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Bell Jar

by
Sylvia Plath

Book Information

Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar
Quiz Number: 8651
Bantam Books, 1971
ISBN 0-553-27835-5; LCCN
200 Pages
Book Level: 7.2
Interest Level: UG

This autobiographical novel presents an ambitious and brilliant young woman's search for values and her eventual breakdown.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Diseases/Disorders, Depression; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Buddy Willard Esther's somewhat boyfriend

Cal a boy introduced to Esther by Jody, with whom she discusses suicide

Doreen Esther's roommate during her month in New York

Dr. Nolan the psychiatrist who helps Esther out from under her "bell jar"

Esther Greenwood the narrator, a talented woman suffering from a nervous breakdown

Jay Cee Esther's supervisor during her magazine internship

Joan Gilling Esther's schoolmate and asylum alter ego

Jody one of Esther's former school friends, who invites her to a day at the beach

Marco a blind date in New York, whom Esther considers a misogynist

Mrs. Greenwood Esther's mother and a mostly unacknowledged focus of her hostilities

Philomena Guinea a novelist and Esther's college benefactress

Vocabulary

balalaika stringed instrument from Russia

caviar a delicacy consisting of salmon eggs

dybbuk in Yiddish tradition, a demon or dervish

parapet a low railing or wall at the edge of a bridge or roof

ptomaine residue formed by the action of potentially poisonous bacteria

sanatorium an establishment for patients suffering a chronic illness

Synopsis

Esther Greenwood begins her narration during a month-long summer internship at a New York magazine. The execution of the Rosenbergs is in the news, and nineteen-year-old Esther has sex and literature on her mind. Her roommate, Doreen, takes her on a series of wild outings with men in the city. Jay Cee, her supervisor, gives her advice about how to educate and package herself for a career in publishing. Flashbacks fill in her academic successes, punctured romance with Buddy Willard, and looming seeds of madness as she faces the future.

During her internship, Esther fails both to lose her virginity and to chart a course to her future. She returns to her mother's house in a Boston suburb for the balance of the summer. There, her isolation and uncertainty descend upon her like a bell jar, sealing Esther into her "own sour air." After several inept suicide attempts, Esther takes an overdose of sleeping pills.

This attempt leads to her hospitalization, ultimately in a private asylum. Under the care of Dr. Nolan, a female psychiatrist, Esther undergoes electroshock treatments. As she gradually improves, her progress is measured against the character of Joan Gilling, a schoolmate whose suicide attempt and institutionalization preceded Esther's. Two milestones in Esther's recovery come when she admits to hating her mother, and when she purchases the birth control device she believes will

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Bell Jar

by

Sylvia Plath

bring her the same freedom men enjoy in pursuing sex and relationships.

When, after her release, Joan does kill herself, Esther has gained enough ground to withstand the event. In the book's closing pages, she absolves Buddy of any responsibility for her madness and enters a room to face the asylum staff's judgment about her readiness to re-enter the world.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literary Analysis

How does the style of narration change as Esther's condition deteriorates?

In the New York scenes, the narration proceeds fairly logically, despite the quiriness of Esther's observations. As in the scenes of her day and night with Constantin, episodes have a completeness and continuity that evaporates later in the novel. By the time she arrives at the asylum, chapters consist of fragments strung together without transitions. Although the narrator's voice and the hard edge of her acuity remain intact, the context and timing of events diminishes.

Literary Analysis

What function does Joan Gilling's suicide serve in the novel's structure and meaning?

Joan functions for the most part as Esther's alter ego. Their relationship is a conflicted one, with Esther sometimes calling Joan her double, while at other times she sees Joan as a "Martian," a creature as inscrutable to Esther as she could be. This conflict mirrors Esther's own inward dissociation. Joan's death thus allows the novel a double ending. Her suicide is Esther's and stresses the on-going threat of Esther's bell jar in a way that would not otherwise have been feasible.

Inferential Comprehension

Why might Plath have chosen to end the novel as she did?

The novel ends with Esther entering the room where her capacity to leave the asylum and live in the world again will be judged. By ending the novel before that judgment is delivered, Plath emphasizes the fact that the bell jar still hovers above Esther. Whatever the board decides, the possibility of relapse and suicide will always hang over her.

Constructing Meaning

How does Esther's character engage the reader's sympathies to the extent that it does?

Her humor and incisiveness when observing others keeps Esther's narration from becoming self-indulgent or incoherent. Despite the intentionally and necessarily ironic gap between her judgment and her skill with language, Esther does pinpoint people and cultural phenomena in ways with which readers can identify. When she blasts Buddy as a hypocrite for having an affair, she is personally being unfair to him, but her underlying critique of the sexual double standard is certainly a valid one. Her views of how marriage turns women into "kitchen mats" are likewise valid. Esther's experiences, although anomalous and extreme, do locate dilemmas and emotions that were and are widely shared.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors With the publication of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, the posthumous myth and reputation of his former wife received a fresh injection of interest. Hughes, who has subsequently died, addressed both the person and the mythical dimensions of Sylvia Plath in his poems. It was the breaking of a decades-long silence on his part, during which feminists in particular speculated on the meaning, facts, and culpabilities of their famous marriage. For students interested in pursuing the topic, Plath's life and stature as a kind of Fort Sumter to the feminist movement provides a wealth of

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Bell Jar

by

Sylvia Plath

approaches. How did her reputation evolve? Was the controversy surrounding her relationship to Hughes justified or itself scandalous? Does her writing still matter? Does Hughes's book close the circle of her myth in any way, whether satisfactory or evasive?

Comparing and Contrasting As a discussion topic or extended writing project, ask students to choose another literary heroine and compare that character to Esther Greenwood. Celie in *The Color Purple*, Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady*, or Jane Eyre could begin a list of possibilities. Perhaps a good cue for the comparisons would be to ask in what ways are the two characters emblematic of their different eras.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion Esther has two very different experiences with electroshock therapy. She does not, however, offer enough information for readers to gain a clear idea of the treatment's protocols, general efficacy, or prevalence. Often sensationalized, the treatment is still used and still controversial. It would be a strong subject for students to research with the aim of separating fact from fiction. Is it a barbaric practice or a medically justified procedure?

Responding to Literature In Lois Ames's biographical note, one critic of the book said of Plath that "if she can learn to shape as well as she imagines, she may write an extremely good book." Assume this critic is implicitly correct about Plath's "inability to shape." Ask students to become Plath's imaginary literary editor. Have them identify and enumerate the flaws or omissions they might have suggested the author address. For instance, Esther's brother seems less than a ghost in the structure of the novel. Should Plath have drawn him somehow into action?