

# A response to the bell jar



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A response to The Bell Jar You would expect anybody to want the story of depression and suicidal thoughts to leave your memory as soon as the last page was over. However, The Bell Jar is more about the spirit of survival when you are trapped inside yourself and frightened because the rest of the world expects something completely different from you - something you cannot give them. Something you don't want to give them, if it were your choice. This is a highly auto-biographical account by Plath of a young girl finding that when she should be most excited about her life, she instead finds that things aren't what she expected, and that the culture of the 1950's doesn't seem to allow for all that she wants, which begins her descent into depression. The Bell Jar is in the form of a Roman Æ clef, with the main protagonist (Esther Greenwood) succumbing to mental illness. Esther begins the book thinking about the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and thinking about cadavers, which is a motif that recurs later on in the book. Esther thinks being executed " must be the worst thing in the world" so we can tell already that she isn't exactly a light-hearted character. Instead, throughout the novel, we discover that she is brutally honest and self deprecating. She wins a fashion writing contest, but she isn't overly happy about it, viewing the gifts and girls there superficial: " Girls like that make me sick. " She appreciates that she is meant to be " the envy of thousands of other college girls" but her future prospects trouble her: she can either marry, or, become a secretary and then marry. Neither satisfies her. " So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed", so women in the fifties are meant to want to marry and start a family, and Esther knows this too well. It isn't considered right to think otherwise, so these opinions stay inside her head.

Perhaps, this is why mental illness festers within her; she bottles up her emotions and they mix with more menacing thoughts. Buddy laughs at her when she refuses his marriage proposal, saying that she's "crazy" and she'll "change her mind." She thinks he is a hypocrite, and no longer sees him in admiration because of his double standards. Esther observes the gap between what society says she should experience at her age and what she does experience, and this gap intensifies her madness and makes her more aware of any problems she may have, because she is now able to see everything wrong with her in somebody else's eyes. Esther feels she must repress her natural gloom, cynicism, and dark humour and falsify opinions. Esther's aversion to convention and conforming is perhaps why she feels so alone and her darker thoughts take over: "...it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier". Esther's descent into depression and suicidal thoughts begins on the ski slopes, when she begins scared but "aims straight down." This is only the first of numerous suicide attempts: she wants to experiment hanging, drowning, pill overdoses and cutting her wrists, but there are flaws in all of them. When Esther tries to kill herself, she finds that her body seems determined to live. Esther believes that she could kill herself if she wanted, but she must remove the barrier of her body. The beating heart symbolizes her life, as her heart beats, "I am I am I am." This is again enforced because she never assigns a blame to her depression, but rather lets us see what it feels like to be in it and living through an experience like it, as she wrote - "I am I am I am." But I think the whole book can be summarized by something that Buddy said to her on the ski slopes: "'You were doing fine,' a familiar voice informed my ear, 'until that man stepped into your path.'"