

The bell jar, by sylvia plath



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This quote sums up the entire novel, *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath. Esther, the main character, is afraid of the future and what independence might bring. She is a girl of nineteen just starting out in the world. Esther encounters trouble with herself because she has no idea where she wants to go or who she wants to be.

During her short stay in New York, her boss asks her what she wants to be. Esther, once confident, replies now that she is unknowing. The major conflict through out the entire novel is Esther trying to find herself. This theme is not fictional however; the author's inspiration for this story was her own life.

During her six-year marriage to the English poet Ted Hughes, she was forced to move to England and leave the familiarity of America. This caused Sylvia to “plunge into a horrific psychic abyss” (www.allstands.com). Much like Esther, Sylvia was a Fullbright scholar at the college of Cambridge. Sylvia met her husband there and shortly after they moved to London.

During the period of time where she met her husband and her death, Sylvia struggled with the same issues the main character did in the book. Sylvia had two children, which she loved dearly but shortly after the birth of their second child, Ted had decided the marriage failed so he left his family. Diminishing and continually unhappy, Sylvia Plath became fascinated with death as a result of this travesty as displayed in the book, once again, much like Esther. *The Bell Jar* is almost completely autobiographical, only at the end Sylvia does not get better. She left milk and bread for her children and quietly gassed herself in the kitchen (1963). (www.

allsands. com) It was because of the theme of this book that it became a classic. It was the first of it's kind to bring the reader into the mind of a girl, becoming part of the intricate and realistic journey through herself. A great impact is placed on the reader because of the memorable story as well as a plot that remains stagnant in the mind.

This classic novel arouses questions and provokes thought partly because this story is not completely fictional. This novel is unique even though the main character, Esther, goes through normal feelings of inadequacy that many adolescents do. Prior to this novel, these issues had never been addressed in a novel before. Also, when Sylvia Plath writes, she “ strips away the polite veneer.

She lets her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. ” (writers. com/literature/Plath) In the book, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, Esther Greenwood undergoes complications in her life while encountering trials and tribulations in her quest for independence, that teach her; life is full of uncertainty, it takes courage to live, and things still do go wrong, but you can recover. The theme of the book shows life's little twists and turns while Plath brings Esther on an emotional roller coaster. Esther, the main character, always had issues from her past.

Her father died when she was just eight and left nothing for the family, which sent them into a downward emotional and physical spiral. That kind of trauma would upset any family. Esther's frequent reminiscing shows her need for her father and her feelings about him dying. Sylvia Plath's father also died when she was just a girl. This made the writing all the more

believable because the author had actually experienced what she was writing about. The theme of the book has to do with Esther's journey through life and herself.

She journeys to New York, where she learns about all of these things. It is in New York where she begins her trek into mental illness. She feels inadequate because she was raised in middle-class however, she does not realize that does not mean anything. She is just as intelligent as the other girls, just as pretty and has the same scholarship they do. In Esther's early partying she feels left out greatly when her best friend in New York, Doreen, leaves her for a boy.

Esther tries to fit in by hanging out with another boy. She realizes that is not the answer to her problems when he tries to rape her. This situation sent her into a deeper plunge because she felt she no longer knew herself at all and that also made her feel very insecure, which sets the stage for the entire novel. Upon her return home, Esther feels she does not know her friends any more. Esther misses who she was and starts acting strange.

She no longer bathes or sleeps. " It seemed silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next. It made me tired just to think of it. I wanted to do everything once and for all and be through with it"(Plath 128). This quote shows Esther's impatience with everything. I couldn't see the point of getting up.

I had nothing to look forward to"(Plath 117). Esther has lost all of her ambition and drive because of the rejection from the summer writing course and also from her experiences in New York. She basically turned into a

walking zombie. Esther tried to return to normalcy by writing a novel but came to the conclusion that she must have real life experiences to draw from. She could not write about love if she had never experienced it.

Another major conflict in the theme of the story was Esther's sexuality. She quite often planned to lose her virginity but never seemed to succeed. The underlying cause of this is that she did not really want to. She was brought up to believe that was something special and you should wait until marriage to share yourself with someone else in that way.

After hearing Buddy Willard, her long-time crush, had slept with a woman about thirty times, she decided that must be what people were supposed to do. She felt her virginity was a barrier in recovering from her plaguing lethargy. Over the course of the novel, a main theme was seeking out men for Esther to sleep with. The final major theme in the book was about Esther's mental breakdown. Receiving electroshock therapy had truly scarred Esther. This continued and sparked her to believe that she had now done something wrong, which delayed her recovery.

This period of delay had made Esther contemplate and even attempt suicide. After trying to cut, drown, choke and hang herself, she says the following quote. " Then I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and time again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash ...

I knew when I was beaten"(Plath 159). This quote is exhibited through the entire novel by Esther's attitude; she actually gives up easily on trying to kill herself. It was just a brief fascination to pass the time, and she hoped that it

would rid her of her problems, which it did not. Esther's body seems to know her own limits but does not seem to really want to die.

She just wants her problems to go away. As soon as Esther realized that, she gave up on suicide for good. That was her first step towards her true recovery. Throughout the novel, Esther does not really view herself as mentally ill.

She feels she has problems that no one else has ever had, and nothing can fix it. She looks for a quick resolution with suicide, but realizes there are no fast resolutions. This novel is told in first person narrative point of view, which really gets the meaning across well. The reader is actually brought into the mind of Esther Greenwood, through her electro-shock treatments. " I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment. Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head .

.. There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world .

.. it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant"(Plath 143). This is a very effective way to tell the story because it gets more across to the reader.

Through this type of narration, the reader only knows what Esther knows. This is sometimes more effective than another type of point of view. First person narrative adds to the theme of the story by allowing us to see exactly

what Esther is going through. In this book, the reader gets to ‘play psychiatrist’.

It is up to the reader to determine Esther’s motivations and what makes her work, why she feels the way she does, and what ultimately aids her to her recovery. The relationship between Esther and everyone she encounters is clearly displayed. The reader does not know what the other characters think. This leaves their motivations up to the imagination to decide. There are numerous characters in this novel that all have to deal with Esther’s mental breakdown, and then her reconstruction.

“ The figures around me weren’t people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life”(Plath 142). First and foremost, Philomena Guinea is Esther’s sponsor for college. She is somewhat of an inspiration to Esther. The fact that Guinea was admitted to a mental hospital during the height of her writing career inspired her to sponsor Esther’s stay at the most prestigious mental hospital. Esther views her as not really important, and does not really care for her personally that much. Esther’s mother plays the role of a hard-working housewife who insists on teaching Esther shorthand.

Esther feels her mother does not really care for her and is a little self-absorbed. Esther does not even consider her mothers feelings while going through her mental breakdown. Buddy Willard’s mother and Esther’s mother are family friends, which is how the two kids met. Esther’s long time crush on Buddy seemed to keep her hanging on to normalcy in college.

The popularity she gained from it was one encouraging factor. “ When she heard I was going to the Yale junior prom she treated me with amazement and respect”(Plath 60) The relationship that Buddy and Esther shared might be thought by the reader to be a cause in Esther’s breakdown. That relationship did not cause the breakdown, but it was a factor that sparked Esther into other actions. The cause of her illness was herself. Buddy actually helped Esther find herself through some of the experiences they shared.

It was Buddy Willard who sparked Esther’s inquisitive nature on sexuality. Doreen, Esther’s best friend in New York, made light of life and helped ease Esther’s mind. She was a sort of inspiration of a carefree life to Esther. Jay Cee, her boss, served as a mother figure. She was also a door. Jay offered Esther a permanent job but Esther was afraid of the future and of settling down so she declined the offer.

Esther’s first psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon, was the person who made her distrust the mental hospitals and doctors. He gave the shock treatments incorrectly and that only harmed Esther. Dr. Nolan was the true savior of the novel.

Esther befriending this doctor was the key to her recovery. She was another mother figure and had kind and understanding personality traits. This is all that Esther needed, a sympathetic ear, someone to guide her and listen to her problems. The plot of the entire story is that Esther has no one to listen to her problems. It seems Esther is lacking a true best friend, one that will listen, offer advice, and not a superficial girl, one who is truly genuinely nice. This plot is not predictable however.

Part of what makes this story so interesting is that the plot has no definite direction. It can head off in any way since Esther is so unpredictable. The central conflict of this story was Esther against herself. Esther made it seem as if the conflict were between herself in the world.

She did not think that anyone went through what she did. "... I had felt dreadfully inadequate.

The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it"(Plath 216). Her feelings are quite normal for a teen and if she would have seen Doctor Nolan first, instead of Doctor Gordon, she probably would not have gone through the mental anguish that she did. This plot relates to the theme in that it follows Esther through the stages of her mind and mental illness, while she learns a little bit about herself. The setting does not play a major part in the novel.

The time period was the 1940's up north, around Boston. " I had never been to Chicago, but I knew one or two boys that went to Chicago University, and it seemed like the sort of place where unconventional, mixed-up people would come from"(Plath 132). This story would probably not have occurred had it not been in the 1940's however. Back then; women were just being introduced to dual career families and role changes.

Usually the father would work while the mother stayed home and took care of the children. Also, society was much more conservative. Girls dating other girls were not viewed as normal, as it is now, and people were not looked fond upon if they saw a psychiatrist. If Esther were in this time period, she would be normal. She would probably be able to talk to her mother a lot

more, since our society is a lot more open minded than it was 60 years ago. This setting suggests somewhat of a melancholy mood.

If Esther were having a bad day, she would be in the hospital most likely receiving shock treatments. If it was a good day, perhaps she had a conversation with Joan, Buddy's ex-girlfriend, and actually liked it. In the movie *Girl Interrupted*, Susana Kaysen, identical to Esther Greenwood, travels through the exact same roller coaster. She also goes through the contemplation of her life and the matter of questioning her own sexuality. A good day for Susana was talking about a man she thought she loved, but only had a sexual dependence for. She seems to take the same turn Esther did in trying to find herself.

To finalize the main focus which is, Esther Greenwood undergoing complications in her life, encountering trials and tribulations in her quest for independence, learning life is full of uncertainty, it takes courage to live, and things still do go wrong. Esther recovers. With the help, guidance and love of Doctor Nolan and the patience and understanding of her mother and friends, Esther perseveres. This novel was a bit predictable, in that everyone likes happy endings, if only it ended happily for Sylvia Plath. Through this novel Esther travels along a road of self-discovery, which is one of the main reasons why this book became the classic it is.

Esther learns from experiences in life and through her relationships with people. As the *New York Times* says, " Esther Greenwood's account of her years in the bell jar is as clear and readable as it is witty and disturbing ...

this is not a potboiler, nor a series of ungrateful caricatures; it is literature.

“(New York Times)