

Rationale

This written task relates to Part 3 of the Language and Literature. This task is based on the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. Although the novel was first published in 1963, certain themes such as gender discrimination remain prevalent in today's society. This task will explore the reasons why the novel still remains relevant fifty years after it was published.

The task explores several aspects and themes of the novel. Firstly, it explores the theme of growth as *The Bell Jar* tells the story of a young woman's coming of age. The task attempts to highlight the emptiness of conventional expectation as society expects women of Esther's age and station to act cheerfully, flexibly and confidently. Also, this task endeavors to understand the restricted role of women in 1950s America and how this compares with today's society. Esther's sense of alienation from the world around her comes from the expectations placed upon her as a young woman living in 1950s America. She feels anxiety about her future because she identifies only mutually exclusive choices.

The nature of this task is a blog article written by a 21 year-old literature student. The writing is casual as the writer sympathizes with Esther and compares her present condition with that of Esther's. As the article is intended to look and read authentically, I have included a range of features typical of this text type such as a headline, author, date of article publication and a comment. The use of the first person narrative establishes intended purpose of the text, which is to reveal to the reader why contemporary woman are able to relate with Esther's sentiments in her journey through womanhood. The intended audience could be for career women, and young women fresh from university.

Word Count: 294 words

KEEP WATCHING THE WORDS

I'm Una, a recently graduated literature student from UCLA. This is where I share my thoughts, articles and book reviews

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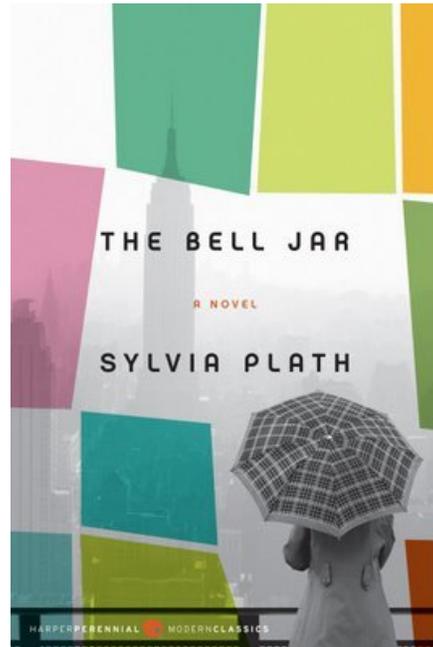
26
June
2013

Why Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* Still Remains Significant 50 Years Later

By: Una Lovelace

The Bell Jar is a work of fiction that has been referenced by many popular sources in media. This includes *Gilmore Girls* and *The Simpsons*, as many consider the novel as a 'symbol for teenage angst'.

While Plath was widely acknowledged for her literary skills, unfortunately, today, she is remembered more for her morbidity, depression, and suicide. She was one of the first poets to use the confessional style in her poetry and revealed to her readers, male and female alike, her fear of being frank. In this light, maybe Plath's greatest legacy was to encourage others to examine their issues, opening doors for more open discussions on how mental illness is viewed by society and the stigma it carries. 2013 marks the 50th anniversary of *The Bell Jar*'s initial publication. As a recently graduated literature student, I am fascinated by Esther's defiance of social expectation and Sylvia Plath's ability to express Esther's struggles with identity and living up to the perception of an 'ideal woman', fabricated by society.



The critics of Plath's work often only consider Esther's many suicide attempts. Granted, these consume a large portion of the novel, but I cannot bear to think that this specific element defines the book. I am captivated by Plath's portrayal of a young woman, unsure of her position in society. In this fashion, I see much of myself, and friends, walking in Esther's shoes, struggling to find an 'authentic identity'.

Similar to Esther, I recognise, and am constantly reminded, that I am "supposed to be having the time of my life". It is, after all, an age that must be savoured. Since graduating and being on the verge of entering the 'real society', I definitely do not feel carefree, and in fact feel bound by society's expectations. I often feel anxious and unsure of myself. I have had some overwhelming opportunities in the past, whether it be an internship or a merit scholarship, but I cannot help but sympathise with Esther's episodic, and oft-repeated, sentiments: "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo".

Additionally, I often find myself resonating with Esther's view of the world around her, her family, her relationships and friends. While Plath is writing in the context of the 50s and 60s, even in the 21st century I feel lost and empty, without any specific goals. Though I can write, read, and analyse the world that surrounds me, I am paralysed by the abundance of options available to me.

Perhaps *The Bell Jar's* most prominent symbol is that of a fig tree. Esther visualizes the tree, as a tree of choices; each fig representing a different role. One is a 'wife and a mother', another a 'famous poet' or an 'editor'. Esther believes that she may only take one fig; she sees herself "sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death", saying "I wanted each and every one of them but choosing one meant losing all the rest". Despite the brief freedom during the war, Esther feels that women cannot have it all and embrace both marriage and career. Plath illustrates the sexual double standard between men and women by filling the novel with brutal, ignorant males, who enjoy pleasures that women can only dream of. When I first started reading the book, I found some of these ideas interesting, remaining pertinent to today's society. But, I was already aware, several decades after the book was written, that my fate did not have to be the same.

Has society truly changed for women in the last fifty years? Women do enjoy more freedom than ever before, but we must still prove ourselves as equals in many male dominated spheres. Through the novel, Plath is able to explore the position of women in society and force the readers to evaluate this. But as the rates of brutal rapes and subsequent deaths of young women are rising, our fight is not over. We still have battles to win, mountains to climb, and seas to traverse. Undoubtedly, Plath has made great strides in assisting our understanding of emotions of deprivation and isolation in women's lives.

Through the character of Esther Greenwood, Plath shows her readers the universality of feeling unsure of oneself. To be frank, the first time I read *The Bell Jar*, I felt relief (almost as if the 'bell jar' had been lifted) knowing that someone understood the anxiety of being a young woman in this deranged-and-impossible world. The relevance and significance of Plath's work carries into the present. While Plath's writing does not offer answers as to how one is able to overcome this 'bell jar' of anxiety, depression, and confinement, readers may feel relieved to find that they are not the only soldiers fighting in this battle we call 'life'.

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Thoughts on “Why Sylvia Plath's "*The Bell Jar*" Still Remains Significant 50 Years Later”



Alex

October 2, 2013 at 5:25 pm

Hey Una! I really enjoyed your post. But, I am surprised that you did not mention anything about the motif of mirrors in the novel. As you mentioned, one of Esther’s problems is that she has no firm sense of identity. She often looks into a mirror, or sees a reflection of herself, but is unable to recognise the image of herself. For example, Esther comments on her reflection in the elevator in New York as “a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into [her] face”. This shows you how Esther’s feeling of inadequacy lead her to dislike her own appearance and struggle with her inner demons. Personally, I can relate to Esther’s failure to recognize herself and I find that many girls and women, alike, may feel the same way.

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Word Count: 973 words

References:

Galo, Sarah. "Why Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar' Is Still Relevant 50 Years Later, Especially For Millennials." *PolicyMic*. PolicyMic, 12 June 2013. Web. 01 Feb. 2014.

"Keep Watching the Words." *Keep Watching the Words*. 30 Sept. 2013. 13 Dec. 2013 <<http://keepwatchingthewords.wordpress.com/2013/09/30/book-review-the-bell-jar-sylvia-plath/>>.

Plath, Sylvia, and Victoria Lucas. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber & Faber, 1971.

Appendix:

The text type for this written task was based upon the following book review blog post:

"Keep Watching the Words." *Keep Watching the Words*. 30 Sept. 2013. 13 Dec. 2013 <<http://keepwatchingthewords.wordpress.com/2013/09/30/book-review-the-bell-jar-sylvia-plath/>>.

KEEP WATCHING THE WORDS

I'm Una, a second year literature student at Warwick University. This is where I share my articles and book reviews.

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30
SEP
2013

Book Review: *The Bell Jar* (Sylvia Plath)

by una231



Rating: ★★★★★

I have no idea why it took me so long to read *The Bell Jar* - a feminist novel with a young protagonist, exactly my kind of thing - so when I found the paperback cheap on Amazon I decided I no longer had an excuse not to read it. I packed the book for my journey home from uni (for my dad's 50th celebrations), hoping that it would occupy me during the 3+ hours of waiting around on trains/at stations. And I was not disappointed. By the time I reached my hometown, I'd finished the entire book and loved every single bit of it. *The Bell Jar* was Plath's only novel, semi-autobiographical and completed shortly

before she committed suicide. It tells the story of Esther Greenwood, a young woman who moves to New York to work at an intern at a magazine, but soon falls into a deep depression. The first half of the narrative describes Esther's life in the city, while the latter part tells of her experiences with psychiatrists and mental institutions.

In her lifetime, Plath was primarily a poet, and this is evident through the entirety of *The Bell Jar*. The narrative is flawless, many phrases are quotable, and the language flows incredibly smoothly. There was never a point where I wanted to stop reading, because I just couldn't find a sufficient place to break from the story. Let me give you an example:

“ I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow, the million moving shapes and cul-de-sacs of shadow. There was shadow in bureau drawers and closets and suitcases, and shadow under houses and trees and stones, and shadow at the back of people's eyes and smiles, and shadow, miles and miles and miles of it, on the night side of the earth.

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A long quote, I know, but a memorable one. Plath's writing captivated me from beginning to end - it wasn't just the words that made this story what it was; it was the beautiful way that Plath brought the words forward to her reader.

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I also loved Esther as a protagonist. I often find in novels about mental health that I can't put myself in the shoes of their main characters - I don't know why, maybe it's just the fact that I can't understand their frame of mind - but Esther is so realistic, so relatable, that I formed parallels between her and myself straight away. I guess this is because Plath's own experiences inspired her writing, but she really managed to capture her character. The other reason I liked Esther was because of her feminist stance. I think you'll have already guessed (from my reviews of [Lady Oracle](#) and [Jane Eyre](#)) that I love novels with strong women protagonists, and *The Bell Jar* definitely falls into this category. Plath explores the restricted role of women in America in the 50s, and Esther's spiral into depression is partially caused by the conflict between her desire to succeed and the social pressure to get married and have children. The book discusses this issue, and questions traditional gender roles, without being obvious or preachy.

As well as being beautifully written and having an engaging and interesting protagonist, *The Bell Jar* is also, simply, a great story. Like Esther, the reader is taken on a mental roller-coaster I changed my prediction about the ending every time something new happened, and I never stopped wanting to know what happened next. Would Esther settle down and marry, or would she stay independent? Would she fight through her depression or end her own life? If you want to know the answers to these questions, I guess you'll have to read the book (or the Wikipedia page, but I wouldn't recommend it!).

That's all I have to write about *The Bell Jar* for now, but believe me when I say: my words don't do it justice. If you're interested in women writers, or if you enjoy coming-of-age stories (think, *Catcher in the Rye*), give Plath's novel a read. You won't be disappointed.

(This book was #37 on my [Classics Club list](#))

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(Ernest Hemingway)

10 thoughts on "Book Review: The Bell Jar (Sylvia Plath)"

 [N@ncy](#)
September 30, 2013 at 6:22 pm
Sylvia Plath is not an author I would choose to read. I said that about R. Bolano (2666) and must say am surprised what Bolano has written. Due to your 5 star rating I will give Bell Jar a second look! Great review and enjoy your comments about about how you connected to Plath.

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 [una231](#)
September 30, 2013 at 10:17 pm
Thank you. I think, even if *The Bell Jar* doesn't appeal to you as a story, any reader will appreciate the standard of Plath's writing. It's worth a read - it doesn't take long to read so you won't be wasting a lot of time if you don't like it!

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