

The Bell Jar

by Sylvia Plath



Analysis by
Golubtsova Varya



Sylvia Plath was an American poet and novelist. Known for her confessional poetry, Plath was one of the most notable poets of the 20th century. By the time she took her life at the age of 30, Plath already was admired as a writer. Yet she is not famous solely for her poetry. Another notable work of Plath is the only published semi-autobiographical novel “The Bell Jar”.

In works, she fits all the sincere emotions in. Plath’s writings is a doorway to her marvelous yet shocking mind full of despair, rage and love. Death theme is seen throughout all her works. As it was recognized by many critics, Sylvia Plath's works are often overlooked and her death remains to be the most famous aspect.

“Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.”

— Excerpt from poem “Lady Lazarus”

Plath was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. As her works also carry a strong theme of a protest against male oppression of women, some of feminist movement see her as a "symbol of blighted female genius". Plath not only influenced many women authors but her works play a big part of American literature in general.

“The Bell Jar”

I consider the title of the novel to be not quite suggestive although at the first sight, it can seem to be cryptic. I may suppose that it is so because the title contains a metaphor.

The main character, Esther Greenwood describes her life as being suffocated by a bell jar. Heroine suffers from clinical depression and she uses “bell jar” as a metaphor which helps her to explain mental state she is in.

"If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat -- on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok -- I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air."

— Excerpt from novel “The Bell Jar”



The Setting

It is obvious that events take place in the USA. The main character moves from the suburbs of Boston to New York. The first sentence of the book sets the location: *“It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York”*. After the heroine gets nearly raped she returns back home to her mother.

I admit that the story is set in 1953 because the author mentions death penalty of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg which took place in June of 1953. Nevertheless, it is known that this novel is semi-autobiographical and like Esther, Sylvia Plath was a guest editor at a magazine beginning in summer of 1953.



The Subject

The subject of "The Bell Jar" may be formulated as: Depression, Feminism and Search for Self. In this book, Plath addresses the question of socially acceptable identity. It is inevitable since events set in oppressive patriarchal society of mid-20th-century America. The main character is expected to become a housewife, and a self-sufficient woman, without the options to achieve independence: *"And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat."* But Esther fears not only the loss of her inner self. The other subject, depression, is hard not to notice. Throughout the book the main character suffers from mental health problems. Although Esther is a straight-A student, she does not feel being good enough. Before her suicide attempt, she repeats to herself: *"You'll never get anywhere like that..."*



The message

The message of the literary work runs as follows: Esther finds it hard to live in patriarchal society where she does not fit into the culturally acceptable role of womanhood. The idea is conveyed through the presentation of the main character's feelings. Esther suffers because she is not sure about her future since she does not see herself as a mother and other ways of living are criticized in society. The heroine is crushed between social and her own expectations, she is paralyzed and scared. She does not know what to do because she is being trapped under a glass bell jar.



carreró dels GATS

The Plot

In my opinion, the basic plot of the story develops slowly towards a violently dramatic incident and a conclusion where everything falls into place. The story is told in the first person narration and is full of philosophical digressions and illustrative examples. It conveys keen observation and sharpness of characterization. The plot structure of the story is closed, since all the necessary elements: the exposition, the story, the climax and the denouement are presented in it.

“The Bell Jar” has a skillfully developed and slow-moving plot. The exposition takes place traditionally at the beginning of the story, where the author grabs our attention from the very first line. She reflects upon her life in New York and how lucky she is to gain an internship at a prominent magazine but still knowing that something is wrong with her.



Sylvia Plath introduces us to other interns who live with Esther at the hotel in New York. The heroine describes in detail several dramatic incidents that occur during her internship. Her life is tangled with her internal monologue. She reminisces about her ex-boyfriend, muses about execution of Rosenbergs'.

Before her internship ends, Esther attends a party with her friend where she meets Marco, the man who later attempts to rape her. After, she returns home to her mother. There Esther decides to start writing a novel. At the same time her mind is busy with worries about the future. Esther becomes very depressed and she is forced to see a psychiatrist by her mother. The climax runs as follows: Esther's mental state gets worse and she attempts to kill herself. In the denouement she is sent to elite treatment center where she recovers and comes back to life.



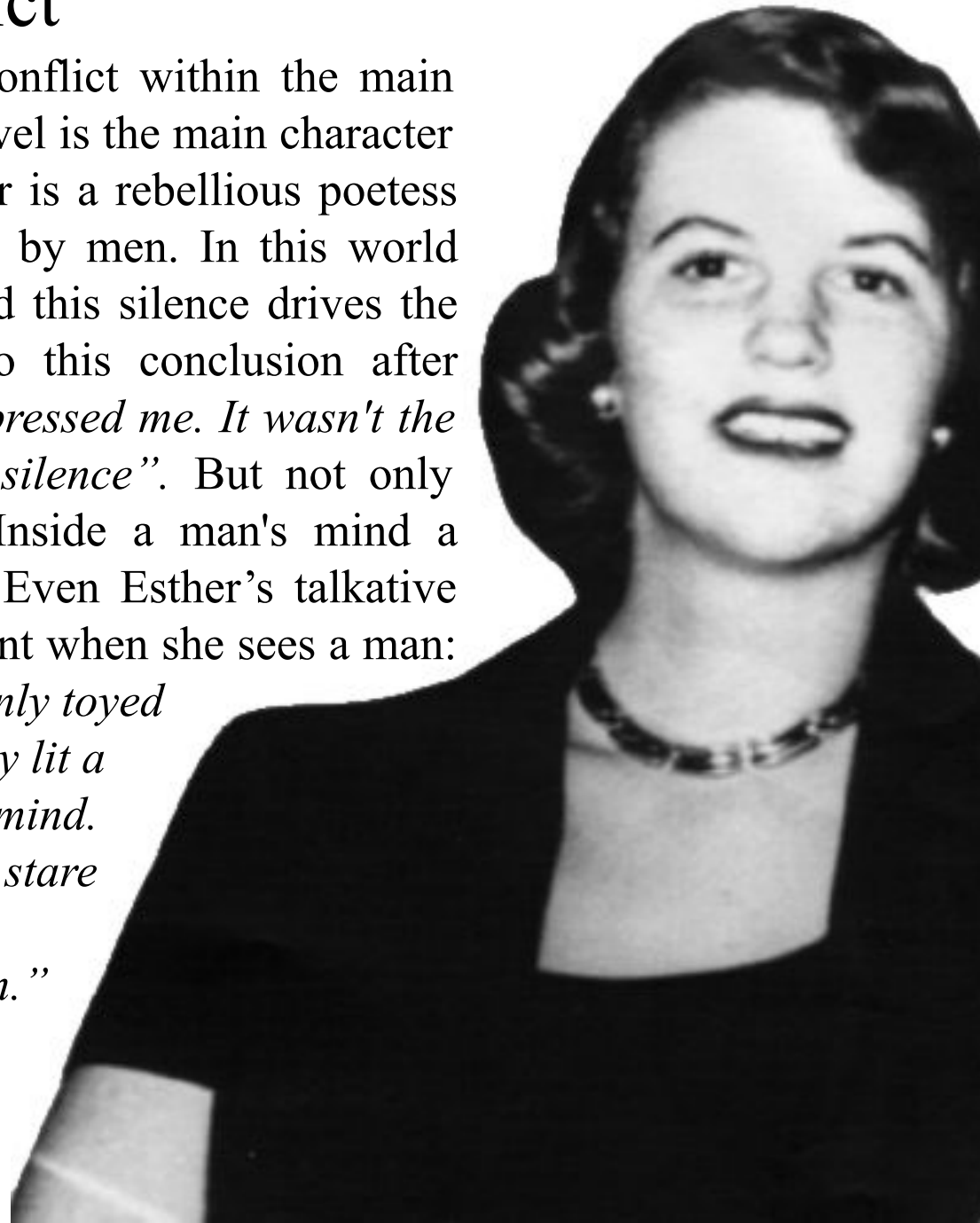
The Characters

The protagonist of “The Bell Jar” is Esther Greenwood. The story does not have an antagonist but the main character “battles” with her mental health problems, society’s prejudice and sexism. Minor characters are Esther’s ex-boyfriend Buddy Willard and her friend Doreen. The charm of the story lies in a realistic portrayal of the characters. They are full-blooded and many-sided. The major character is represented through her behavior and thoughts. She seems to be complex yet her feelings are well-written so every reader can appear to be in Esther's shoes and live through her emotions. The reader finds the main character easy to understand. Plath sends us to the deep core of Esther's mind. The author lived through the main character herself and she knows her well. So that is why the center figure is so skillfully written.



The conflict

We may observe the internal conflict within the main character. Another conflict of this novel is the main character against society and its values. Esther is a rebellious poetess in the patriarchal world which runs by men. In this world women are expected to be silent and this silence drives the heroine to the blue. She comes to this conclusion after analyzing her state: *“The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence”*. But not only women see themselves voiceless. Inside a man's mind a woman is always a silent creature. Even Esther's talkative and energetic friend Doreen falls silent when she sees a man: *“Doreen wasn't saying a word, she only toyed with her cork placemat and eventually lit a cigarette, but the man didn't seem to mind. he kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human.”*



Definitions

- Hone – точить

“I wanted to hone myself on it till I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife.”

- Pristine – чистый

“I smiled, seeing a pristine, imaginary manuscript floating in mid-air.”

- Dissolve – растворяться

“I said to myself: "Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, New York is dissolving.”

- Twang – звон

“Then the music twanged to a stop, and we heard Lenny's voice announcing the next number.”

- Muzzle – морда

“Lenny jutted a thumb at the meek little gray muzzle and stiff jackrabbit ears.”

- Sultry – жаркий

“It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York.”

- Immense – огромный

“I buried my face in the pink velvet facade of Jay Cee's loveseat and with immense relief the salt tears that had been prowling around in me all morning burst out into the room.”

- Fumble – шарить

“I fumbled in my pocketbook for the gilt compact with the mascara.”

- Avalanche – лавина

“Every morning a snowy avalanche of manuscripts swelled the dust-gray piles in the office.”

- Plush – удобный

“I sank back in the gray, plush seat and closed my eyes.”

Quotes

- "Do you know what a poem is, Esther?"
"No, what?" I would say.
"A piece of dust."
Then just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, "So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together." And of course Buddy wouldn't have any answer to that, because what I said was true."
- "People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly."
- "I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterward, the cadaver's head -- or what there was left of it -- floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard, who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place, and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar."



• Every time it rained the old leg-break seemed to remember itself, and what it remembered was a dull hurt. Then I thought, "Buddy Willard made me break that leg." Then I thought, "No, I broke it myself. I broke it on purpose to pay myself back for being such a heel."

• "...and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise. Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep. I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again."





The

Vocabulary

The story is full of emotionally-coloured words, which show the author's knowledge for a deep psychological analysis of her characters: "nonplussed", "prosy", "pure", "cynical", "homesick", "awkward", "sorry", "purged", "dull", "flat", "dreadful", "keen", "overstuffed".

There are some international words: "balalaika", "vodka", "liquor", "student", "bar", "hotel".

I've found such phrasal verbs, as: "come back", "fade away", "lean over", "come up", "slip out", "bend upon" and idiomatic expressions: "bowl somebody out", "sniff something out", "count something out".

I'd also like to mention the proper names Pollyanna, Ladies' Day, Massachusetts, New York, Boston, Constantin, Hilda, Aztecs, Peru, Paris. There're a vulgar expression: "Leggo, you bitch!", "What the hell...".

The Stylistic Devices

Now let's see how the author's intention is realized in the language of the story. The author uses a great variety stylistic devices to help the reader understand the main character.

Sylvia Plath uses such similes: “expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet”, “an arm, heavy as a dead man's, but warm with sleep”, “carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar”.

Metaphors “freshness evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream”, “to hone myself till I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife”.

Personification: “shadows carving themselves”, “eye dropped”.





Conclusion

In conclusion I want to say that "The Bell Jar" should not be overlooked. Sylvia Plath did a great job, she skillfully worked with words and illustrated her emotions vividly. Plath had a talent of talking about her suffering in a witty, sometimes even comedic, way and that makes her story more tragic. She shows an interesting but sadly relatable idea of ambition. And although events in Plath's book take place a long time ago, I consider that some problems of mid-20 century women still haunt us even nowadays. Her confessional writings will always be relevant. People admire Sylvia Plath for making such an honest depiction of her mind while it suffers from mental health problems.

The novel will continue to resonate with people throughout time as it talks of problems of human nature that will always persist.

Thank you for your attention!

