Esther Greenwood is a beautiful, smart young woman, common of the 1950s. However, beneath the shy, striking exterior lies a confused, depressed girl, who struggles to cope with her past and even more, with her future. The Bell Jar is Esther's story, of her life and identity struggle she suffers at just 19 years of age. Written by Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar is also known as Sylvia's story, a recollection of events during her own college years. With themes like sex, female intelligence, depression, and femininity, The Bell Jar, written in 1963, is controversial and contemporary for its time, even in modern America. Even so, this novel appeals to young women more as society develops, and feminism is adopted by popular culture. A milestone to feminist literature, Plath courageously challenged norms of the time, like male supremacy, virginal purity, and the family domestic scene.

The Bell Jar begins in New York, where Esther is on an internship for a fashion magazine. An aspiring journalist whose college and high school years were filled with constant recognition of her potential, Esther finds herself lost, confused and overwhelmed in the big city. However, now feeling subjectified and categorised by her intelligence and prestige of being a female university student in the 1950s, Esther also finds herself confused with her place in the world and expectations that have been placed upon her. She struggles through issues of social interactions, sexual experiences, and moral dilemmas. Within a few months of returning to her home town of Boston, Esther's confusion and depression leads to an emotional breakdown, suicide attempt and a state of madness. She soon finds herself in a mental asylum.

This breakdown and suicide attempt is the first of many parallels between Esther and her creator. In an article by Shulman (1998), suicidal vulnerability factors include former suicide attempters, ex-mental patients, divorce or relationship failure, being a foreigner, and broken homes. An element of both Plath's and Esther's life is evident in all of these categories. First is the initial suicide attempt. Shulman describes Plath's first known suicide attempt at age 20 as a pill-overdose taken in a secret place, becoming semi-comatose, and accidentally found 2 days later. Esther's first suicide attempt, at age 19 or 20 is quite similar:

“Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. Wrapping my black coat around me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one.” (Plath, 1999, p178).

“… The bottle slid from my fingers and I lay down” (Plath, 1999, p178).

Esther also expresses feeling of a failed romantic life and sexuality throughout the novel. She constantly reminisces a lost love, Buddy Willard, whom she broke the relationship off with after realizing he wasn't as pure as she had lead her to believe. In a similar fashion, Plath wrote the novel during and after her break-up with poet husband, Ted Hughes, who had cheated on her. Sylvia very much admired and obsessed over Hughes, making this a point of her depression. In addition to this, Esther also was a mental patient and whose father died at age 9, much the same as Plath.

Sylvia Plath was also a poet. In fact, The Bell Jar was the only novel written by Plath, released in 1963, only three weeks before Plath's suicide on February 11, 1963. However, many of Sylvia's poems have been compared with The Bell Jar in order to make some sense of the mystery that lies within it. There are a number of feelings throughout the novel are consistent with Plath's poems, as discussed by Cooper.

“Esther Greenwood's disintegration and her ordeal by electroshock therapy associate The Bell Jar with poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever 103 Degrees," which represent seething rage through images of heat.” (Cooper 1997)

Anger and pain expressed in the shock treatment scenes throughout The Bell Jar also have been compared to poems in Ariel, having the same "angry intensity" (Cooper, 1997), emphasizing the link between Esther's and Sylvia's emotions. Within the novel however, Esther's breakdown was caused by a number of things. Her mother is disapproving of her life, and her lost love, Buddy Willard, seems to be haunting her through repeated memories. Esther resents Buddy to an extent, blaming him for her confusion. This section of the book, separated by the initial suicide attempt is where a changed writing style from very flowing and structured, to jolted and short disconnected paragraphs occurs. This is very symbolic of Plath's life, emphasizing the novel's realistic and autobiographical feel.

Esther also had a strong obsession with suicide,
often contemplating ways of committing the act throughout the book. Plath too had this obsession, this being the basis of a friendship with another poet, Anne Sexton (Spivak 2004). At one point, Anne expressed to Spivak, a fellow classmate during college that “She’s the only one who understands” (Spivak, 2004).

With all of this in mind however, Esther’s breakdown was primarily due to an identity crisis. She felt alienated, lost, and alone in the big city of New York, and surprisingly for her, even more so in her home town of suburban Boston. However, was it her obsession with place in society that caused her to become an outcast, or did society itself alienate her? She remained haunted by Buddy Willard here, this feeling of romantic failure accentuated by inquisitive neighbours.

This theme of challenging domesticity is an ongoing stress factor in Esther’s life as an educated woman in the 1950s. However, the use of advertising throughout the novel is also used to accentuate Esther’s identity crisis. Bryant (2002), a feminist writer, proposes that Plath ‘prompts new ways of thinking about American advertising [and its] representations of domesticity’ (Bryant, 2002). Various scenes in the novel mention advertisements, and this is used to construct Esther as confused about what other people’s expectations of her are. Esther also compares characters she meets along her journey with characters presented on television ads, drawing parallels between the importance of mythologies in advertising and Plath’s construction of domesticity (Bryant, 2002). These ideas shape Esther’s world around her, assisting in her confused reality.

Interestingly, Sylvia Plath and her husband Ted Hughes entered ad and slogan competitions in 1958 (Bryant, 2002). This interest in ads is an example of Sylvia writing from personalized ideas and perceptions. Aird confirms other parallels between Esther and Sylvia to include family history, education, and interests. Aird also states that the novel is not only autobiographical on one level, but also therapeutic, on another (1973).

Esther’s identity battle has a consequence: ongoing depression. This idea of identity is linked to Plath’s interest in advertising, questioning whether it is advertising that structures ones identity, or identity that structures advertising. Winner describes The Bell Jar to create discussions on “how women should go about shaping their lives” (Winner 2002). In addition to this idea, Winner also proposes a strong link between Esther and Sylvia, stating that Esther is in fact Sylvia’s “alter-ego”. Of course, this was influenced by a quote on cover of the 1972 edition of the novel, stating it is “about the events of Sylvia Plath’s twentieth year: about how she tried to die and how they stuck her together with glue”. The 1999, and most recent version of the novel, only makes one inference to a biographical context of the book, saying “it broke existing boundaries between fiction and reality” (Plath, 1999).

Another parallel between Esther and Sylvia is the desire for money (Bludtzen 1983). This source states that Plath’s motives for writing The Bell Jar were to increase monetary wealth and to plough through her personal history. Esther’s constant strive for achievement is consistent with the idea that success is monetary success. Plath too had these dreams, expressed in Letters Home. This striving for success is aligned with the three aspects of femininity that Bludtzen talks about, being “the woman’s place in society; her special creative powers; and finally, her psychological experience of femininity” (1997).

All of these ideas send Esther into a state of madness, altering her perspective on everything around her; objects coming too close, or receding too far (Newman 1970). Receiving a series of shock treatments throughout the novel, along with a repeated mentioning of the Rosenberg’s, a couple charged with the death penalty for treason, this issue of madness is ongoing. Esther loses her sense of stability when she isn’t able to write, this being the initial reason for psychological sessions, and consequently, shock treatment. This mentioning of the Rosenberg’s is significant in this part of the book, as it is a reflection of ‘a punishment to fit the crime’ idea, with electric shocks being Esther’s punishment. Esther perceives that the crime is that everyone thinks she’s a failure, when really, she was only a failure to herself. It was this perception that was an influencing factor in her depression.

In some ways, this book could be seen as a reflection of Plath’s own life, Esther being a visionary of her own identity. The truth of this idea will never be known, as Sylvia Plath, author of The Bell Jar, tragically committed suicide on February 11, 1963, only 3 weeks after the books initial release in mid January. However, the flowing, deeply sensitive
The narrative makes the characters, setting and events seem so real, it is hard to believe the book is fiction. Esther is so similar to Sylvia in many ways, historically, emotionally, and characteristically. It is easy to understand why many scholars think of Esther as being Plath’s hidden past, inner child, or even alter-ego. *The Bell Jar* is Sylvia Plath’s first and last novel, but as stated, its autobiographical validity will never be known.

**Reference List**

Aird E, 1973 ‘Sylvia Plath’, Oliver and Boyd, Edingbrough


