While I’ve never attended a bra burning party like those in the 1960s, I get the distinct impression Sylvia Plath may have done. *The Bell Jar*, while a depressing tale of a young woman’s mental anguish, is also an advertisement for feminism. The novel’s protagonist, Esther Greenwood, travels through three main phases including life as a happy college student, then a mental breakdown, followed by a recovery period. Throughout this journey we see that Esther’s madness is a metaphor for escaping the social mores of the 1950s which included getting an education, finding a suitable husband and having children.

The basic plot of the book follows the three main phases. As a happy college student, Esther wins prizes for her academic achievement and goes to New York to work as a fashion editor for a month, with eleven other talented ladies. While it is meant to be the time of her life, Esther is depressed about her future. After attempting suicide, Esther is committed to a mental institution where she goes through a period of recovery. Plath uses amazing imagery and description throughout the book; but it is a difficult novel to read because of its depressing realism.

Sylvia Plath is as well known for her poetry as she is for her feminist ideologies, and these are clearly seen in *The Bell Jar*. Esther’s dislike of marriage and having to care for babies are just two examples of these new ways of imagining women’s roles. Fitzsimmons explains that Esther gives ‘herself permission to hate, and what she hates is the place allotted to women in the masculine society…’ (2001). While Esther desires to have freedom and achieve her dreams, she feels suffocated by societal expectations. Paula Bennett describes *The Bell Jar* as a tale of ‘the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high minded young women like Plath’ (Bennett 1986 cited Bonds 1990).

Perhaps Plath has drawn upon her own failed marriage and unhappiness to express Esther’s character realistically. Throughout the novel there are startling similarities between Plath and Esther Greenwood’s lives. Both Plath and Esther struggled with identity, depression and suicide and both grew up during the Cold War (Liukkonen 2000). This period was characterised by a return to established gender roles, which Esther openly rejects in the novel. In the latter section of the book, Esther questions her difference to expected social norms:

> Why couldn’t I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puking baby like Dodo Conway? If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad. (p. 234)

Dodo Conway is the image of the perfect American woman during the 1950s – Esther concludes that because she looks after babies all day she must have no aspirations of her own. While Esther aspires to be many things, she is disheartened by the fact she must be either beautiful or intelligent to succeed, and she sees herself as neither of these. Wagner (1986) explains that Esther’s scattered image of female responsibility and childbirth are brought to the fore when she sees Dodo Conway. Unless Esther accepts the role Dodo Conway has, she will have no life – ‘this is the message her society, even the most supportive elements in it, gives her’ (Wagner 1986).

Esther is also disheartened by her disappointment in relationships. Her relationship with Buddy Willard stops immediately when he tells her he has had premarital sex. Esther has been told that good girls remain pure until marriage but the same standard does not seem to apply to men (Bundtzen 1983). While Esther meets many men along her journey most of them are portrayed as stupid as they do not understand her (Fitzsimmons 2001). Esther longs for a man who has intuition and while she meets such a man (Constantin) he has no interest in her (Fitzsimmons 2001). Esther also has encounters with lesbian relationships, but turns these down and says she is sickened by Joan ‘the woman who loves other women’ (Bonds 1990). While Esther wants freedom, it is clear that she is worried about what society thinks and her sense of identity is still derived from finding the right man (Bond 1990).

Lynda K Bundtzen describes *The Bell Jar* as an allegory about three aspects of femininity: ‘…the woman's place in society, her special creative powers; and finally, her psychological experience of femininity’ (Bundtzen 1983). An example of this can be drawn from Esther’s relationship with her mother, which is said to be modelled on Plath’s own relationship with her mother. Plath’s perception of her mother was as controlling and demanding and this is how Esther sees her mother (Howe 2003; Gerisch 1998). Not only is Esther’s mother a success in the eyes of society because she has conformed to their expectations, she is also constantly trying to get Esther to change and become more like her. Throughout the novel, Esther’s mother encourages her to take shorthand so she can take down letters for important men, and find a husband so she can have children. However Esther wants to dictate her own thrilling letters not those of others (Plath 1966). All of these things show that Esther’s mother is trying to fit her to the woman’s place in society.

The desire of Esther’s mother to make her acceptable to society causes her to disregard Esther’s special creative powers. While all Esther wishes to do is write novels her mother wants her to do practical things so that after college she will be able to get a job and a husband. Esther’s creativity is not recognized by her mother and she sees Esther’s writing as trivial and not good enough to get her a great job or a decent husband. Esther’s psychological experience with her mother is
one of disappointment and hatred. Her mother expects Esther to be a perfect society woman but she never lives up to her mother's standards, and because they rarely agree on anything, Esther comes to hate her mother. When her mother brings her roses at the institution on her birthday Esther throws them away:

'That was a silly thing for her to do,' I said to Doctor Nolan.

Doctor Nolan nodded. She seemed to know what I meant.

'I hate her,' I said, and waited for the blow to fall.

But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something pleased her very, very much, and said, 'I suppose you do.' (p. 214)

Esther feels she cannot live up to her mother's expectations just as she can’t live up to society's expectations and thus she feels that she is going mad. If she is not a normal woman in her culture thus she must be insane.

During the period in the novel which Esther is admitted to a mental institution, she confronts many issues. Plath explores taboo subjects such as lesbianism, sex, contraception, suicide, psychotherapy and electrotherapy. Throughout the novel, a parallel is drawn between Esther's electrotherapy and the electrocution of the Rosenberg's during the Cold War. Esther's rejection of accepted societal norms is linked with the traitorous acts of the Rosenberg's against patriotic Americanism. In this way we see a cynicism toward American society and its acceptance of difference. Clearly in Esther’s case her difference means she believes she is mentally insane.

The Bell Jar is pervaded by a consuming idea and continual search for ‘success and recognition, especially an identity and right to exist’ (Gerisch 1998). Esther struggles to know who she is and at times she feels she does not have the right to exist such as the various times she tries to commit suicide. When she tries to drown herself, we get a glimpse of her desire to be recognised as she is and a desire to exist when she says, ‘I am, I am, I am’ (p. 166). It is as though there are two separate parts to Esther’s self, one that cannot go on and wants to give up, and the other part that continues to desire identity and right to exist. For example when Esther tries to drown herself she explains:

‘I dived, and dived again, and each time popped up like a cork.

The grey rock mocked me, bobbing on the water easy as a lifebuoy.

I knew when I was beaten.

I turned back.’ (p. 169)

While Esther could have easily killed herself by staying in the water she feels she has been beaten by a greater force that wishes her to stay alive. She feels as though she is being tormented and kept alive so that she can remain to suffocate under the bell jar.

The characters in the novel are carefully and cleverly described. They are seen as various voices which contribute to Esther's breakdown and recovery. From Buddy Willard, Esther's first love, to her best friend Doreen, we get a sense of being in the mind of Esther. Joan Gilling, one of these characters, seems to follow Esther throughout the novel and Esther refers to her as ‘the beaming double of my old best self’ (p. 216). Joan is everything Esther is not or perceives she is not and thus we see two separate selves representing Esther's one self (Bonds 1990). However, as we discover, both Esther and Joan are tormented by the cultural expectations placed upon women and Joan ultimately commits suicide as she obviously cannot live within such a society (Bonds 1990).

At the very end of the novel Esther's future is found in the hands of those in charge of the mental institution. At this point the novel ends abruptly not revealing what has happened to Esther. We never discover if she recovers fully as the novel refers to Esther as a ‘retreaded tyre’, not a new tyre, thus we get the impression that she may fall into depression again. I felt this was an unfulfilling ending but perhaps better than reading an entire novel where the main character ends up committing suicide. It is important to note that the same year Plath wrote the book (1963), she also committed suicide so perhaps the final chapter was written in this way (Arnold 2000).

Sylvia Plath throws away fanciful notion and replaces them with an unsettling reality. If you have the courage to see into the mind of someone looking through the distortion of a bell jar, this book is for you. There is a strong feminist undertone in the book as Plath cleverly interweaves into the story the oppressive nature of society toward women, and show the unreachable expectations culture has placed upon women. Esther's own shortcomings are magnified in a society who advertises perfect wives and mother's, anything short of this ideal is just not good enough. Longing for freedom and a career of her own, Esther feels society will not accept her. She is constantly told by the media and various women, including her mother, that she is not up to standard. Throughout the novel, a woman's place in society, her special creative powers and her psychological experience of femininity are contested (Bundtzen 1983). The Bell Jar is a revolutionary book for its time, and perhaps it still characterises the way some women feel within patriarchal societies. This novel is clever, insightful and has a great depth that is compelling because of its revolutionary themes and literary genius.
Reference List


Plath, S 1966, The bell jar, Faber and Faber, London.