

Literary Analysis: *The Bell Jar*

Length: 750-1,000 words (Five paragraphs, *minimum*)

Format: MLA, typed. Must include a WORK CITED PAGE and PARENTHETICAL CITATIONS after all quotations. If you consult any outside texts or articles and use those words or ideas in your paper, you MUST cite this information using both in-text citations and on your Works Cited page. Below is a list of topics that we discussed in class. I have written them up into what I think are manageable questions/topics for a 3-4 page paper. If you have another idea that does not appear on this list, please check with me for approval. You should begin using your handbook *Easy Writer* as you have questions on formatting, using quotation marks, and general editing.

CHOOSE ONE:

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

1. Write a character analysis of Joan that focuses on her repressed/unexpressed sexuality.
2. Explain how Buddy Willard typifies the American young man, circa 1955.
3. What role does Marco serve in this story?
4. What role does Doreen serve in this story?
5. What wisdom does Esther gain by the end of the book?
6. Analyze Plath's portrayal of the successful, older women such as Philomena Guinea and Jay Cee. How does Esther view these women? What might these women have sacrificed for their success?

THEMES:

1. Virginity is a major source of conflict in Esther's world. Why?
2. What are Esther's views on religion and faith? Can one say that she has created her own philosophy?
3. One might argue that all of Esther's problems are connected to the death of her father. Do you agree?
4. How would you characterize the mother/daughter relationship(s) in this story? Where do the major conflicts arise?
5. How does Plath portray hospitals, doctors, and treatments for mental illness in her novel?
6. How does Esther feel oppressed by society's expectations for women?
7. Suicide, a fairly "taboo" subject, is handled here with frankness and openness. Explain how Plath describes Esther's obsession with death and suicide.
8. Plath constantly writes about Esther's fear of the future and an overwhelming number of choices. Explain when and how Esther experiences this fear of the future.

EVENTS

1. Analyze an event (or events) that triggered Esther's downward spiral (Choose 1-3).
2. Fantasy vs. Reality: Examine Esther as an Unreliable Narrator.
3. Esther's Creativity: When does the voice of the poet emerge in the text? (metaphors, vivid perceptions, etc.)

SYMBOLS:

1. Analyze the story of the fig tree. How does it connect with Esther's romantic relationships?
2. Analyze the metaphor of the bell jar. How does this image capture feelings of depression and when does this "bell jar" feeling show up in the book?
3. Can you find a repeating metaphor (such as doors, mirrors, etc.)? What is the significance of this metaphor?
4. When Esther loses her virginity to Irwin, blood seems to be a very important symbol. What might this event/blood represent within the context of the story?

SOCIAL ISSUES:

1. Esther, in many ways, cannot conform to society's expectations for a young woman. Discuss ways in which she cannot or refuses to conform.
2. The Bell Jar is set during the mid-1950's. According to Plath's portrayal, how was mental illness treated during this time?
3. The idea of marriage is a huge source of conflict for Esther Greenwood. Explain why.
4. Getting birth control, portrayed in the scene in which Esther visits the doctor for "a fitting," is hugely liberating for her. Analyze why.
5. Describe and analyze some of the specific treatments/methods to treat mental illness in this story. What are Plath's attitudes towards these treatments?

*Prove your arguments and ideas by using supporting quotations in each body paragraph with at least one or two short quotations from the book. Make sure to cite page numbers in parenthesis after each quotations.

Examples:

Esther says, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (267).

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am," writes Plath (267).

SAMPLE OUTLINE (Outlines will vary slightly depending on your specific topic and logic of your ideas).

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Your "hook"
- B. Brief Summary of Book (a few sentences)
- C. Lead-in to your topic
- D. Thesis Statement.

(Example: In *The Bell Jar*, marriage is a huge source of conflict for Esther Greenwood because she fears that marriage will destroy her creativity and that she will be doomed to live her life as nothing more than a mother and a wife.)

II. First Body Paragraph:

Topic Sentence: Esther is a talented writer and a poet.

- A. Her happiness depends on her ability to express herself.
 - 1. Supporting Quotation
 - 2. Significance of Quotation
- B. She has already been working as an intern in New York.
- C. She has won contests.
- D. She confesses to wanting to be a poet.
 - 1. Supporting Quotation
 - 2. Explaining the significance of the quotation

III. Second Body Paragraph

Topic Sentence: For Esther, getting married to Buddy Willard, or any man at this time in her life, would be a huge mistake.

- A. To be a good wife, she would have to be subservient to a husband and to his career.

- B. Most men (according to Esther) live by a double standard that she cannot accept.
- C. Buddy belittles her work (poetry), and she is afraid that she would become “a doormat” instead of a professor and poet.
- D. Societal expectations are that women behave as proper ladies, that they do not express unpleasant thoughts, etc.

IV. Third Body Paragraph

Topic Sentence: With marriage come children, and without reliable birth control, it's impossible to control how many babies you have.

- A. Women giving birth seem like victims who have lost control of their bodies.
- B. She cannot relate to those women who are happy mothers, who seem cut out for motherhood.
- C. She fears that she would forget her career once she started having babies.
- D. Societal expectations are that women should devote all their time and energy to raising babies or else risk being labeled as a bad mother.

V. Concluding Paragraph

- A. Restate thesis in different words, from a slightly different perspective if possible.
- B. Additional thoughts on your topic.
- C. Your opinion, how you responded to the book (optional)
- D. Summing up of the book as a whole and discussing Plath's contributions on this topic.