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Emilie Auger

ANG 553

07175273

Web Contribution on The Bell Jar

Background of the book: The Bell Jar was written by Sylvia Plath in 1963. She wrote it under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. The book was republished under her name in 1966. Sylvia Plath committed suicide a month after it came out. Some say the novel is semi-autobiographical. Plath was believed to be depressive like her character, Esther.

What is a bell jar? A bell jar is a bell-shaped glass container used in science. An object is put under it and the air is evacuated for scientific observation. When the air is evacuated, we are unable to hear a potentially noisy object under a bell jar. Plath gave this title to her book to express how Esther and possibly herself felt. Under the symbolic bell jar, living normally is impossible, Esther is misunderstood, she is unable to come out, she is observed and receives treatment from a medical staff.

Summary of the book: The story is about Esther, a young woman from Boston. She goes to work for a magazine in New York, but does not enjoy her time there. She does not seem to fit in with other people. She wanted to attend a writing class which was taught by a famous author, but it did not work out. After that, she tried to write a novel on her own, but did not believe her writing could be realistic because of her lack of experience in life. When she returned home, Esther was rather depressed. She was also stressed because she did not know what she would do after school. She did not want to be a stay-at-home mom and the limited career choices open to women were not what she was looking for either. Esther becomes more and more depressed. At some point, she had

problems sleeping at night. Her mother encouraged her strongly to seek professional help. The first psychiatrist she consulted was a male. He did not seem to understand Esther and quickly came to the conclusion that she has a mental illness. The psychiatrist starts treating her with electroshocks. This does not help Esther get better. Her condition worsens and she refuses to go on with the treatment. She feels she is trapped under a bell jar and she finds it overwhelming. She is unable to live a normal life at this point. Esther tries to commit suicide a few times without really wanting to kill herself. However, she feels she cannot live under the bell jar much longer. She decides to go ahead and commit suicide for real. She hides and takes too many prescription sleeping pills. After an undetermined amount of time, she is discovered and saved. She goes back to a mental hospital, but, a different one. This private hospital is much better than the first one. Esther meets with a female psychiatrist this time who is more understanding than the previous one. Esther is again treated with electroshocks, but, this time the treatment is successful and she feels much better. Esther feels the bell jar is gone and she is no longer trapped under it. She feels she can leave the hospital and live a normal life again.

What I think: I think it is disappointing that we never know if Esther was able to leave the hospital. The novel ends when she is about to have her interview; to see if she is ready to leave. I thought the book would be a message of hope that one can overcome difficulties in life, but now I don't know. Considering the fact that Sylvia Plath committed suicide a month after it was published, maybe she did not know if one could truly break free from depression. In her case, unfortunately, she could not. I think the image of the male doctor who is unable to understand, or does not want to understand his female patient is a reminder of women's oppression under patriarchy.