

The Bell Jar



Name _____

Date _____

Essential questions

Who was Sylvia Plath? Why do you think she used a penname when she published *The Bell Jar*?

Who were the Rosenbergs? Why does Plath begin *The Bell Jar* with an allusion from American history?

In what ways is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* similar to J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*?

What is the primary meaning of the novel's titular Bell Jar?

“Instead of leaf shapes and enlarged diagrams of the holes the leaves breathe through and fascinating words like *carotene* and *xanthophyll* on the blackboard, there were these hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas in Mr. Manzi’s special red chalk.”



VOCABULARY

These words which appear in *The Bell Jar* have been identified as words or derivatives of words that have appeared on past SAT tests. They are listed here in the order in which they appear in the novel.

1. Seep - to pass or escape through an opening very slowly and in small quantities.
2. Hullabaloo - noisy excitement or fuss.
3. Abrasive - using friction and roughness of texture to smooth or clean a surface.
4. Elaborate - made with a lot of intricate detail or extravagant ornamentation.
5. Giddy - feeling dizzy or unsteady and as if about to fall down.
6. Intuition - the state of being aware of or knowing something without having to discover or perceive it, or the ability to do this.
7. Cynical - contemptuous of human nature or the motives, goodness, or sincerity of others.
8. Gawky - awkward and clumsy, often because of being tall and not well coordinated.
9. Morbid - inspiring disgust or horror.
10. Crucial - most vital and of the greatest significance in determining an outcome.
11. Nonchalant - calm and unconcerned about things.
12. Vamoosed - to leave in a hurried way.
13. Devout - devoted to a particular personal interest or cause.
14. Impassive - showing no outward sign of emotion, especially on the face.
15. Verdant - green with vegetation or foliage.
16. Waspish - showing spite or bad temper.
17. Peculiar - unknown to most people, e.g. because of being hidden or remote
18. Ptomaine - one of a foul-smelling group of organic bases containing nitrogen.
19. Homely - plain or less than pleasing in appearance.
20. Evasion - avoidance of something unpleasant, especially a moral or legal obligation.
21. Fuming - to emit gas, smoke, or vapor, or be emitted in this form.
22. Spiritual - relating to the soul or spirit, usually in contrast to material things.
23. Boisterous - full of noisy enthusiasm and energy, and often roughness or wildness.
24. Repulsive - making somebody feel disgust or very strong dislike.
25. Unscrupulous - not restrained by moral or ethical principles.
26. Histrionic - overdramatic in reaction or behavior.
27. Brazen - showing or expressing boldness and a complete lack of shame.
28. Idiom - a fixed distinctive expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the combined meanings of its actual words.
29. Seduce - to persuade somebody to have sex, especially by using a romantic or deceptive approach.
30. Rendering - a portrayal of somebody or something in art, music, literature, or drama.

“The silence depressed me. It
wasn’t the silence of silence. It
was my own silence.”



“The Sound of Silence”

Written by Paul Simon and Performed by Simon and Garfunkel (1964)

Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence

In restless dreams I walked alone
Narrow streets of cobblestone
'Neath the halo of a street lamp
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light
That split the night
And touched the sound of silence

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

“Fools,” said I, “You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you”
But my words, like silent raindrops fell
And echoed
In the wells of silence

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming
And the sign said, “The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls”
And whispered in the sounds of silence

Mad Girl's Love Song

*A Villanelle*ⁱ

by **Sylvia Plath**

Smith College, 1954

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

ⁱ a 19-line poem, originally French, that uses only two rhymes and consists of five three-line stanzas and a final quatrain. The first and third lines of the first stanza are alternately repeated as a refrain that closes the following stanzas, and are joined as a final couplet of the quatrain.