And what about the novel’s larger relevance to today’s young reader? At a time when Holden Caulfield’s sensitivities seem unrelated to the hard edges of today’s world for many readers, does *The Bell Jar* still have any meaning...

-Frances McCullough, 1996
The Bell Jar
a Novel

BY SYLVIA PLATH
When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they want to read a line of a poem twice.

-Robert Frank
First published in France in 1958, and in the United States in 1959, Robert Frank’s book *The Americans* changed the course of 20th-century photography and helped the nation see itself more clearly. In 83 photographs, Frank looked beneath the surface of American life to reveal a people often plagued by racism, ill-served by their politicians, and rendered numb by a rapidly expanding consumer culture. Yet he also found new areas of beauty in overlooked corners of the country and in the process helped redefine the icons of America. In his photographs of diners, cars, and even the road itself, Frank pioneered a seemingly intuitive, immediate, off-kilter style that was as innovative as his subjects. Also groundbreaking was the way he tightly sequenced his photographs in *The Americans*, linking them thematically, conceptually, formally, and linguistically to present a haunting picture of mid-century America.
Every Picture Tells a Story

Choose one of Robert Frank’s photographs from The Americans and write a short story (1-2 pages) about it. The story should contain a description of the scene and explain how the characters came to be there in that captured moment in time. The setting is 1950s America. Be creative and have fun with the assignment.
In September 1950 Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) entered Smith College in Northampton, MA, the largest women’s college in the world. There, she continued to publish poems and stories, primarily for the magazine Seventeen, and won numerous prizes for her poetry. In August of 1951 she won Mademoiselle magazine’s fiction contest and the following summer was chosen to be a guest editor for the magazine. Her experience writing in New York City that summer was reconstructed to form the beginning of her first, and only, novel. The Bell Jar was first published in January 1963, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. She had adopted the pen name for publication of the novel because she questioned its literary value; she was also worried about the pain publication might cause to the many people close to her whose personalities she had distorted and lightly disguised in the novel. The central themes of her early life are the basis for The Bell Jar.
“It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.”
Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were American communists who were convicted and executed for conspiracy to commit espionage during a time of war. The charges related to their passing of information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. This was the first execution of civilians for espionage in United States history. The couple was executed at sundown in the electric chair on June 19, 1953.
What is the Sound of Silence?
The Bell Jar: Chapters 1-4
“The Bell Jar sailed right onto the bestseller list in 1971 and despite some complaining reviews, it quickly established itself as a female rite-of-passage novel, a twin to Catcher in the Rye—a comparison first noted by one of the original British reviewers. In fact The Bell Jar was published on the twentieth anniversary of Salinger’s classic and Sylvia Plath herself was just two years older than the fictional hero, Holden Caulfield.”

-Frances McCullough, 1996
Use the results of the Venn diagram to help you define what an anti-hero is in your own words.
I don’t know just why my successful evasion of chemistry should have floated into my mind there in Jay Cee’s office.
The author frequently uses flashbacks to help develop the “present day” story line in the novel. The objective of this lesson is to examine the relationship between Esther’s flashbacks and the main story line.

1. Divide into small groups. Fold a piece of paper in half. On one side write notes about what happens with Esther at Jay Cee’s office in chapters 3 & 4. On the other side, write notes about Esther’s experience with science classes at college.

2. In your group, write the answers to the following questions: How is Esther’s experience with Jay Cee similar to her experience evading chemistry class? How is it different? What do the two have to do with each other? What do you think makes Esther think of the science class situation when she is in Jay Cee’s office? What does this tell us about Esther’s character?
Before Esther meets Constantin, she tells the reader about her relationship with Buddy Willard. Using the folded paper exercise as a guide, consider how the two experiences are connected. How is Esther’s experience with Constantin similar to her experience with Buddy?
The Bell Jar: Chapters 5-8
“Betsy held an ear of corn to show she wanted to be a farmer’s wife, and Hilda held the bald, faceless head of a hatmaker’s dummy to show she wanted to design hats, and Doreen held a gold-embroidered sari to show she wanted to be a social worker in India (she didn’t really, she told me, she only wanted to get her hands on a sari)” (104).
What is the primary meaning of the novel’s titular bell jar?
“I didn’t really see why people should look at me” (113).

“I had imagined a kind, ugly, intuitive man looking up and saying ‘Ah!’ in an encouraging way, as if he could see something I couldn’t, and then I would find words to tell him how I was so scared, as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out” (129).

“Ours was a small, white clapboard house set in the middle of a small green lawn on the corner of two peaceful suburban streets, but in spite of the little maple trees planted at intervals around our property, anybody passing along the sidewalk could glance up at the second story windows and see just what was going on” (115).
So I told him again, in the same dull, flat voice, only it was angrier this time, because he seemed so slow to understand, how I hadn’t slept for fourteen nights and how I couldn’t read or write or swallow very well.
Prozac Nation, an autobiography published in 1994 and written by Elizabeth Wurtzel, describes the author’s experiences with major depression, her own character failings and how she managed to live through particularly difficult periods while completing college and working as a writer. The book was adapted into an independent film of the same name starring Christina Ricci and released in 2001.
How do You Like The Bell Jar so Far?

A. One of the best novels I’ve ever read, a classic in every sense
B. The best novel we’ve read in class this year
C. Not my favorite, but it definitely fits with the curriculum
D. It’s a mediocre novel at best, definitely not a classic
E. I dread reading it so much I’ve resorted to Sparknotes
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We will set these example results to zero once you’ve started your session and your slide show.

In the meantime, feel free to change the looks of your results (e.g. the colors).
“Somehow, in the shadows, the water looked... shadowless like a dream... and welcoming...”
In your groups, review the narrator’s experiences with water in chapter 13 and previous chapters. Then answer the following questions:

1. Based on these scenes, what does water represent in Esther’s life?
2. What power does it have?
3. How could Esther use water to help or hinder her psychological development?

Throughout *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath uses symbolism to enhance the reader’s understanding of Esther’s progression.
The Bell Jar: Chapters 13-16
Rebel without a Cause (1955)

Directed by Nicholas Ray • Starring James Dean as Jim Stark • and Natalie Wood as Judy

“It’s safe to assume that the world of the film teenager would have been a very different one had Rebel without a Cause never been made. As Jim Stark, James Dean created a whole new breed of movie hero - the cool, troubled adolescent - and turned screen-teen culture into a genuine new phenomenon.”

-Angie Errigo, Empire Magazine
**Works Cited**


