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The bell jar text

Note: Late to the Party is a new Electric Literature series where we ask writers to read an author that, for some reason, they've never read. You can read previous entries here. Pre-Reading Impressions Sylvia Plath is often evoked as a symbol of tragedy, depression, and a life cut short. People wonder what Plath could have accomplished had she lived past the age of thirty, for she was an ambitious and, so I've been told, an extremely talented writer. I blame my inability to weigh in on her writing myself as a symptom of a greater problem of mine: poetry is severely underrepresented in my reading history, and Plath is foremost a poet. But I've always felt particularly embarrassed about never having read Plath—a glaring hole in my education, I presume, since her only published novel, The Bell Jar, has been cited by various publications as a seminal feminist text. It's also been referred to as a version of The Catcher in the Rye "for girls," which seems a bit dismissive to me, in part because The Bell Jar is a novel that even my husband, who ingests books at a much slower clip than I, has read and loved. Besides, describing anything as like a famous book by a man but "for girls" implies that women can't fully appreciate a coming-of-age book unless he can identify completely with the lead). It's also been referred to as a version of The Catcher in the Rye "for girls," which seems a bit dismissive to me. I thought The Bell Jar might be a good place for me to start with Plath's body of work—I've read a ton more novels than I've read poetry, and I've even read my fair share of J.D. Salinger, so I feel more confident forming an opinion on this work than on her poetry. I certainly come to The Bell Jar with a lot of associations. Most of all, I can't shake Hollywood's infatuation with the book as not just a symbol of depression but perhaps especially the female high school teenager variety of depression. The presence of The Bell Jar in certain films seems to be shorthand for lending credibility and depth to a young woman's inner turmoil (but of course an intelligent teenage woman would be associated with deep depression—any woman who is aware of her surroundings in the typical American high school can find plenty of things to get her down). "I hate it when you make me laughEven worse when you make me cry" I think of Julia Stiles' serious and sarcastic character Kat reading The Bell Jar in the movie 10 Things I Hate About You, as she contemplates college and infuriating but charming Heath Ledger. In the previous decade, the movie Heathers placed the Cliffs Notes for The Bell Jar at the site of Heather Chandler's death, which was then deemed a suicide, giving Heather a gravitas she had not earned in life. And now Kirsten Dunst is set to make her directorial debut with an adaptation of The Bell Jar starring Dakota Fanning (who, by the way, apparently grew up and turned twenty-three while I was busy blinking or something). Sylvia Plath did kill herself, after several more pedestrian attempts with pills and whatnot, by placing her head in an oven and turning on the gas, leaving literary nerds possessing a dark sense of humor with a simple Halloween costume idea: fashion a cardboard box into an oven, and place it over your head (I know I'm not the only one who has witnessed this). If Plath's method of successful suicide hadn't been so unusual, perhaps her mental state wouldn't overshadow the discussion of her writing so much? Who knows, and anyway it doesn't matter—I want to read Plath's writing to have an opinion of her that isn't strictly about her biography, because, it seems, the world will always be rehashing the details of her life (new letters by Plath are scheduled to be published this Fall, and there is mention of some of these letters referencing abuse she endured at the hands of her famous poet husband Ted Hughes). All this being said, I do admit part of my interest in Plath's writing is due to my knowledge of certain aspects of her life story. As someone who has been suffering recently with some postpartum depression myself, I'm fascinated by the fact that Plath made sure to protectively block the cracks around the bedroom doors of her sleeping infant and toddler before turning on the gas in the oven. mean, is this not indicative of a thorough mind? Seriously, though, even when a woman is choosing to leave this world, if she is a mother, is she always compelled to think of the needs of her children first? In addition to her depression, I sympathize with the pulls both of family and of creative ambition that Plath must have struggled through. Perhaps being in a difficult stage of my life is the worst time to read a novel by a depressed writer who drew on the details of her own experiences for the book's plot, or perhaps it is the best time. Perhaps reading Impressions I've been known to find humor in books concerning suicide before, so maybe it says more about me than about Plath that I found this book to be funny. But I don't think I'm the only one who has laughed at parts of The Bell Jar. In fact, in her introduction to my Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition, Frances McCullough calls The Bell Jar "a very funny book" because of Plath's "amazing humor." She also cites an informal focus group of twenty-something women, all of whom loved the book, and many of whom found it "surprisingly undepressing." I think the reason The Bell Jar reads as funny and undepressing." I think the reason The Bell Jar reads as funny and undepressing, despite the fact that it follows protagonist Esther Greenwood through assorted attempts to end her life and shock treatments in an asylum, is that the writing is so sharp and smart. Esther is besieged by societal expectations and pressures, from conventions of herself as "less than" because she is a woman—she remains questioning of everything. Esther is not a woman who simply falls into line, which is seemingly part of the reason she is dubbed crazy and in need of treatment. I can see why The Bell Jar is a favorite of disaffected teen girls struggling with entry into adulthood, though I still enjoyed the book as a thirty-nine-year-old. Esther is ambitious, and these ambitions are in contrast to the college girls who surround her, almost all of whom seem to be working on their MRS degrees above all. Esther considers, "I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." Now, I don't think that marriage and parenthood hold as many restrictions for women now as they did in Sylvia Plath's time, but it is disturbing that this statement of Esther's can still resonate as much as it does in 2017, as The Bell Jar was first published over fifty years ago become apparent in unfortunate ways, such as Plath's use of phrases like "yellow as a Chinaman" and "dusky as a bleached-blonde Negress." These moments did more to take me out of the narrative than dated plot details like weekend visits from Yale boys or New York society luncheons where girls are treated like debutantes (or maybe such things still happen in New York and I'm just not aware of them). To me, she comes across as a person who is full of strength, and society's assessment of her as a crazy person reads as the gaslighting that drives her mad. Mostly, I was drawn to Esther's unique responses to traumatic events. To me, she comes across as a person who is full of strength, and society's assessment of her as a crazy person reads as the gaslighting that drives her mad. Mostly, I was drawn to Esther's unique responses to traumatic events. of her as a crazy person reads as the gaslighting that drives her mad. One example: she recognizes her would-be rapist as a "woman-hater" soon after meeting him for a date, and she wears his bloody fingerprints from their fight on her cheek into the next day, on her train ride from a month-long fellowship in New York City to her mother in the suburbs. "I didn't really see why people should look at me," reasoned Esther. "Plenty of people looked queerer than I did." It's a complicated action, in that it can be interpreted as both defiant and as the sign of someone who is too exhausted to care ("It was becoming more and more difficult for me to decide to do anything in those last days"). My takeaway is that the circumstances of Esther Greenwood's life drove her to madness, but her underlying depression, I found the portrayal of Esther to be spot on. Her own silence depresses her. A hot bath, one that is hot enough to scald her, one she has to dip her body into very slowly, is often the only thing that can make her feel better. "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath," writes Plath. And I think, same here. In a hot bath, you are alone, and the demands of the world aren't upon you. You can, in effect, melt away. Late to the Party: Lorrie Moore's Self-Help I suppose the realities of Sylvia Plath's own life do bear weight on her legacy in legitimate ways, in that they inform her writing and help to give us an honest portrayal of depression. I find it interesting that Plath chose to write a somewhat autobiographical novel instead of a memoir (though it's possible this choice was largely about an ambition to write novels). Writing a story that is loosely her own, using a fictional character as a stand in for herself, is of a part with the disassociation that a depression and suicide, both Plath's and others', and instead accept depression as something that many people, and certainly not just writers, suffer through. Depression, like any part of a writer's personality, can affect the output of her work, leading to a body of literature that is as diverse as the people who are writing it. There is no doubt to me that The Bell Jar is a feminist text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a new mother myself I responded most strongly to the feminist takes on motherhood. In one notable scene, Esther witnesses childbirth with her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, who is studying to become a doctor. As Esther watches the baby being born and taken away from its exhausted mother by a team of nurses, Buddy explains that the woman giving birth is given a drug so that she won't remember the process. "I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent," says Esther. "Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again." The disassembly of the patriarchy is a painfully slow process. I believe that the time in your life in which you read a book will affect your take on the book, and I can certainly say that I read The Bell Jar very aware of the current Trumpian political climate. Parts of the book read like a rallying cry for women to take charge, and in this way I found The Bell Jar to be quite empowering (and I suppose, yes, this is evidence of my response to this novel being informed by the fact that I am a female reader). In response to an older woman's explanation of marriage as an institution that allows men to have a place from which to launch their lives, Esther responds, "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket." I'm sure that a woman in her twenties, or a man, or anyone who doesn't match my exact demographic, would find different things that speak to them in The Bell Jar. Some might react to Plath's descriptions of sex, others might respond to Esther's difficult relationship with her mother, still others might key in on Esther's interactions with women her own age. But this is the sign of a great novel, I think—one that truly bears the stamp of its author, yet means something different to every reader. Cover of the first edition of The Bell Jar, written by Sylvia Plath under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Published by Heinemann in 1963, wrapper designed by Thomas Simmonds. Introduction Having already accrued renown as a poet, Sylvia Plath chose to publish her first novel, The Bell Jar, under a pseudonym for many reasons. Due to the book's highly personal and semi-autobiographical nature, Plath did not wish to be associated with the text and was concerned with hurting people mentioned in the book. Plath was also concerned about how her mother would react to the novel, which detailed her suicidal ideation, sexual relationships, and other thoughts and actions of a confessional nature. Consequently, Plath requested that the book never be published in America, as many of the characters referenced were real people who she met during her internship in New York City. Furthermore, if the novel was received poorly, then Plath did not want those poor reviews to colour the public's perception of her poetry. Consequently, under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas (a rejected name for the novel was received poorly, then Plath did not want those poor reviews to colour the public's perception of her poetry. published in 1963. "The Bell Jar is an unusual book as it has three different first editions: two in England and one in the United States. The first edition was published pseudonymously in 1963. Following Plath's death, Ted Hughes, who became the executer of Plath's estate, gave Faber permission to publish The Bell Jar in 1966 under Plath's real name. The first American edition was published by Harper & Row on 14 April 1972 due to high demand and, according to Steinberg, fear of piracy. Of all of these editions, the Heinemann edition carries the distinction of being the only one approved by Plath herself. The Faber edition is almost identical, save for the omission of a dedication. Harper & Row took some editorial liberties which I will further address later. This particular copy of the Heinemann edition, however, carries further distinction. This copy, now available in the University of Victoria Library's Special Collections, was given by Ted Hughes to Nicholas Hughes as a gift. Following Nicholas Hughes's death in 2009, the copy was passed on to Frieda Hughes to Nicholas Hughes to Nicholas Hughes's death in 2009, the copy was passed on to Frieda Hughes. Not only is her name written on the title page, but her drawings cover the flyleaves of the novel. According to the Bookseller's description as it is printed in the Uvic Library Catalogue, "Frieda, an artist... 'mended' the wear to the cover and early pages in a series of playful sketches. With two signed letters of provenance from Frieda (in her hand) as well as her initials to the sketches and her signature on the title page. The front board has a large crease running lengthwise, which runs onto the first couple of leaves. It is this damage that Frieda has 'mended' with her art, first drawing a zipper up the front paste-daon, then stitching up the adjacent leaf. A small mouse finishes the stitching on the verso of the front fly-leaf and a crocodile sits on the half-title and on the verso over a small tear in the leaf. This copy is a requent acquisition of the University of Victoria Library's Special Collections section, and has not previously been the subject of scholarly attention. The interactions between Plath's relationship with her own mother to read it. Still, Ted Hughes had no objection to his own children reading the novel in its entirety. This reveals one of Plath's most pervasive points of appeal: her accessibility. If the vulnerability displayed is The Bell Jar is not satisfactory to the modern reader, then they can turn to her unabridged journals, which are almost entirely published. Many of her letters are publicly available, and some correspondence between Plath and Hughes (description available here) are also available at the University of Victoria Libarary's Special Collections. The dedication of the Heinemann 1963 first edition of The Bell Jar. Page 210 of the 1936 Heinemann first edition copy of The Bell Jar, featuring a typographical error. Page 58 of the 1963 Heinemann first edition of The Bell Jar, featuring Plath's unaltered version of Esther Greenwood's musings on Buddy Willard. Page 48 of the 1963 Heinemann first edition of The Bell Jar, featuring Plath's unaltered version of Esther Greenwood's musings on Buddy Willard. Page 48 of the 1963 Heinemann first edition of The Bell Jar, featuring Plath's unaltered version of Esther Greenwood's musings on Buddy Willard. leading Plath scholar Peter K. Steinberg exhaustively chronicles every issue of textual variance between the British and American editions of The Bell Jar. There is little variation between the two British editions of the Bell Jar. There is little variation between the two British editions of the Bell Jar. There is little variation between the two British editions of the Bell Jar. author's dedication" (107). Up until a 1966 reprint, every Heinemenn and Faber edition of The Bell Jar shared the same typographical error in Chapter 16. When Esther is presented with clippings concerning her disappearance, Esther notes that "The next clipping showed a picture of my mother and brother and me grouped together in our backyard amd smiling" (1963, 210). Though this correction was obviously not approved by Sylvia Plath, it seems easy to extrapolate that she would have been fine with it, given that it is clearly a purely typographical error. Many of the alterations to which The Bell Jar would later be subjected, however, were significantly more drastic. When The Bell Jar was republished in America, Harper & Row took much greater liberties in altering the work which Sylvia Plath had produced and approved. Naturally, upon its publication in the United States, British spellings were converted to their American counterparts (i.e. colour became color) and double-quotes were used for dialogue (Steinberg 113). Still, Harper & Row made revisions that went well beyond simply Americanizing the prose. The most notable example of this shows up in Chapter 5. In the original Plath-approved Heinemann edition, Esther narrates, "I thought of Buddy Willard lying even lonelier and weaker than I was up in that sanitorium" (1963, 58). In contrast, the 1971 edition reads, "I thought I was up in that sanatorium" (61). Steinberg notes the impact that this alteration has on the portrayal of Esther's character, pointing out that "The deleted phrase, 'of Buddy Willard's situation non-existant, proffering an image of selfish preoccupation to Greenwood which was not Plath's intent" (133). Steinberg further laments that "in the most recent printings of the book, the excised phrase has not been restored" (133). Different generations and countries. In the case of The Bell Jar, however, slight differences in the texts aid this disparity. Another instance of textual variation occurs in Chapter Four. In the Heinemann version, a hotel nurse gives Esther "a ninjection" in an attempt to remedy her ptomaine poisoning. Harper & Row elected to relieve this nurse of her New York accent, despite the fact that it was clearly an intentional choice on Plath's part. In an early draft of the novel, Plath had typed "an injection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning of injection, producing the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and moved it to the beginning the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and "noved it to the beginning the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "an" and "noved it to the beginning the word "ninjection," but she crossed out the "n" in "n" and "n" a Deer Island Prison is on "a niland" (1963, 157; 1971, 166; 1996, 166). Editorial decisions such as these highlight the complex dynamic between authors and editors. Speculation concerning authorial intent is always a sketchy business, and it becomes even more so when an author is no longer alive to voice their intent. Still, it is hard to know where to draw the line when it comes to editing. Few would argue that it was wrong of Faber to correct the blatant typographical error in the word "amd." Even the conversion from British spelling to American spelling is unlikely to raise eyebrows. In changing the thoughts of the narrator, however, publishers risk altering the integrity of the book infringing on the author's role. Frieda Hughes's drawing of a zipper on the inside cover of The Bell Jar. Frieda Hughes's drawing of a mouse finishing the lace-up stitching on the flyleaf of The Bell Jar. Frieda Hughes's drawing of a crocodile or dragon on the title page of The Bell Though this book is special in that it is a first edition pseudonymous copy of The Bell Jar, this particular copy is unique due to its ownership history. The marks of this history are evident within the book itself. Frieda Jar.Frieda Hughes's second drawing of a dragon (or crocodile) on the verso of the title page of The Bell Jar. Frieda's Drawings Hughes's charming drawings along the inside cover, flyleaf, and title page indicate her ownership of the copy just as much as her signature in the title page. The zipper along the inside cover, flyleaf, and title page indicate her ownership of the copy just as much as her signature in the title page. The zipper along the inside cover, flyleaf, and title page indicate her ownership of the copy just as much as her signature in the title page. suggest coming together, which could be taken in countless different ways (Frieda and Sylvia coming together, for example). Along the first side of the page, where it is being completed by a mouse. Along the title page, there is a tear on the side, which forms the open mouth of what the bookseller describes as a crocodile (though I find it more closely resembles a dragon due to the overexaggeration of the teeth and spikes along the back of its neck). As the bookseller observes, these drawings are dependent on the wear already present in the book. They serve to embellish them, as is the case with the zipper, or to utilize them to artistic effect, as is the case with the crocodile/dragon. Though the drawings are done by a skilled artist, they maintain a simplicity and whimsical charm. All feature Frieda Hughes's initials. Naturally, these drawings can easily be classified as marginalia. With the digitization of many literary works, the value of marginalia came to the forefront of academic discussion. Scholars such as Andrew Stauffer have dedicated extensive amounts of time and research to digitizing and thereby preserving marginalia along with the text to which it is attached, creating Book Traces, an extensive online database located here. I find these instances of marginalia to be particularly good candidates for digitization given their creator's attachment to the author of the text. Though these marks easily qualify as marginalia, they could also be considered under a different classification.

Frieda Hughes has many illustration credits to her name, being an accomplished painter who has illustrated many of her own poetic works. Though the sketches left in this copy of The Bell Jar are a far cry from the intricate oil paintings published in conjunction with her own poetic works, Frieda Hughes's drawings could be classified as illustrations of this work. Hughes has also published in conjunction with her own poetic works, Frieda Hughes's drawings could be classified as illustrations of this work. Hughes has also published in conjunction with her own poetic works, Frieda Hughes's drawings could be classified as illustrations of this work. illustrated by someone else. The simplicity and whimsy of the drawings may seem more at home in a children's or young adult book, because of their content just as much as their style. The mouse lacing up the flyleaf is reminiscent of a mouse lacing up the flyleaf is rem and the laces are tied in a neat bow at the bottom. The fairy tale theme is further maintained by the presence of (what I maintain to be) a dragon on the title page. These drawings suggest many interpretations. Are they simple and childish because Frieda will always relate to her mother's work as a child? Is she mending the wear around her mother's work just as she and her family have tried to posthumously "mend" Plath's reputation? Does the diminutive stature of the mouse attempting to mend the flyleaf represent how small Frieda feels in relation to her mother's colossal legacy? Does their fairy tale theme represent the way Esther functions in the text - a princess trying to escape the jaws of her mental illness? Does the open mouth of the dragon represent the book's ability to swallow the reader? On the one hand, only Frieda knows what she meant by those drawings, and she has not given any interviews on the subject. On the other hand, interpretation need not necessarily end with the author's (or illustrator's) intent. The degree of interpretational claim on Plath's work has been the subject of debate, largely between Plath scholars and Plath's surviving family. The cover of the 2013 Faber & Faber 50th Anniversary Edition of The Bell Jar, designed by Richard Skinner. "Their Sylvia Suicide Doll..." As a literary figure, Plath's image has been blown up and distorted in countless ways. In a sense, this seems natural; Plath is a literary voyeur's dream. Her adolescent struggles and tumultuous adulthood are completely laid out in her published journals. Even without her journals and letters, her novel and poetry are often semiautobiographical. Any reader with sufficient time and curiosity could easily get the sense that they know Plath intimately, and that can give people a sense of ownership over her legacy. Then, of course, many people survive Plath who actually did know her intimately, and they often seek to control or correct her reputation. Scholars have often run into problems with executors of Plath's estate. In the preface to The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, Jacqueline Rose gives voice to this struggle. While writing the book and corresponding with the Hughes's, the book was called "evil. Its publisher was told by Ted Hughes that her "analysis would be damaging for Plath's (now adult) children and that speculation of the kind I was seen as engaging in about Sylvia Plath's sexual identity would in some countries be 'grounds for homicide'" (xi). Of course any degree of speculation can be made about the motives behind such censorship. Maybe, just as Frieda's drawings cover up and seek to mend the damaged pages of The Bell Jar, Ted Hughes is trying to mend the broken perception of Sylvia's reputation. While this creates a frustrating struggle for Plath scholars, Hughes's outrage could be easily justified by they way that Sylvia Plath has been mangled as a cultural icon. For example, a recent cover of a 50th Anniversary edition of The Bell Jar drew criticism for portraying the book as trite "chick lit," which many perceived as an insult to Plath's legacy. Articles (all of which are hyperlinked) sprang up in The Guardian, The Telegraph, Independent, The Poetry Foundation, Huffington Post, and BBC America reporting on the outrage following the unveiling of the cover. Frieda herself entered this cultural fray upon the release of the BBC's film version of The Bell Jar (Sylvia, 2003), starring Gwyneth Paltrow. Furious with this portrayal of the darkest period of her life, Frieda penned a poem, "My Mother." Laced with allusions to Plath's renowned poem, "Lady Lazarus," Hughes condemns the voyeurism of people wanting to watch her mother orphan her as a form of entertainment, saying "They are killing her again. / She said she did it / One year in every ten, / But they do it annually, or weekly, / Some / even do it daily, / Carrying her death around in their heads / And die at will, / And die, and die / And forever be dying." While swirling chaos, similar to these raging cultural debates of authorship and portrayal, is frequently present in The Bell Jar, the title itself offers a glimpse into where the book stands in relation to that chaos. A bell jar is a scientific apparatus which is often used to create a vacuum. It is usually a jar shaped like a bell. "To the person in the bell jar," writes Plath, "blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (Plath 237, 2006). For the most part, this metaphor is used negatively, but I believe that by appropriating it with a more optimistic outlook, we can arrive at a method of reading and interpreting this work. In a sense, this novel is separate from Plath's other works simply by being pseudonymous. Plath wanted this book to be read apart from her, even if she did not entirely know what that would entail. But by taking The Bell Jar apart from her poetry, her journals, her family, her tragic suicide, etc. - and putting it in its own bell jar, perhaps we can get closer to reading this book as Plath would have us read it. Works Cited "The voyager.library.uvic.ca/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=3528226. Accessed 6 December 2016. Grocott, Kirsty. "The Bell Jar's New Cover is Just Perfect: No Chick-Lit in Sight." The Bell Jar by Victoria Lucas." University of Victoria Library Catalogue. Telegraph. 7 February 2013. Hechinger, Paul. "Cover Story: Bell Jar Reprint Artwork Generates Furor - and Parodies." February 2013. 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