



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE BELL JAR BY SLYVIA PLATH

1. What factors, components, and stages of Esther Greenwood's descent into depression and madness are specified? How inevitable is that descent?
2. In a letter while at college, Plath wrote that "I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar." Is this the primary meaning of the novel's titular bell jar? What other meanings does "the bell jar" have?
3. What terms does Esther use to describe herself? How does she compare or contrast herself with Doreen and others in New York City, or with Joan and other patients in the hospital?
4. What instances and images of distortion occur in the novel? What are their contexts and significance? Does Esther achieve a clear, undistorted view of herself?
5. Are Esther's attitudes toward men, sex, and marriage peculiar to herself? What role do her attitudes play in her breakdown? What are we told about her society's expectations regarding men and women, sexuality, and relationships? Have those expectations changed since that time?
6. Esther more than once admits to feelings of inadequacy. Is Esther's sense of her own inadequacies consistent with reality? Against what standards does she judge herself?
7. With what specific setting, event, and person is Esther's first thought of suicide associated? Why? In what circumstances do subsequent thoughts and plans concerning suicide occur?
8. In addition to Deer Island Prison, what other images and conditions of physical and emotional imprisonment, enclosure, confinement, and punishment are presented?
9. What are the primary relationships in Esther's life? Is she consistent in her behavior and attitudes within these relationships?
10. Esther bluntly tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother. What is Mrs. Greenwood's role in Esther's life and in the novel? Is Esther just in her presentation of and attitude toward her mother?

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