

## The Crisis of Border in *The Bell Jar*: A Study of Psychological and Social Thresholds

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### Abstract

This paper explores the theme of the border crisis in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, examining how the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, experiences psychological fragmentation and social dislocation. Using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and the concept of liminality, the paper investigates how Esther's identity is constantly destabilized by boundaries—between sanity and insanity, self and other, body and society. These border crises illustrate the entrapment and rebellion of a female consciousness within a patriarchal framework, exposing the fissures in both personal identity and cultural expectations.

**Keyword:** Greenwood, border, Kristeva, Esther's, Psychological.

### Introduction

“Wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street cafe in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.”

*The Bell Jar*, p. 178 (Harper Perennial, 2005)

Published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963, *The Bell Jar* is Sylvia Plath's only novel and is widely considered a semi-autobiographical work. The novel chronicles the psychological descent of Esther Greenwood, a young woman navigating the pressures of 1950s

American society while grappling with mental illness. Much like her protagonist, Plath herself experienced clinical depression and underwent psychiatric treatment, including electroconvulsive therapy, which informs the authenticity and emotional depth of the narrative.

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) was an American poet, novelist, and short story writer known for her confessional style and intense exploration of themes such as mental illness, death, identity, and the constraints of gender roles. Though she gained more recognition posthumously, her work—including her poetry collections *Ariel* and *The Colossus*—has become foundational in feminist literary studies. Plath's life and writing are often read in tandem, particularly due to the tragic circumstances of her suicide shortly after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, which has contributed to the novel's enduring status as a powerful and unsettling portrayal of a woman's inner turmoil within a repressive society.

The concept of “border” functions on multiple levels within literature and theory. Literally, a border denotes a dividing line or boundary that separates one physical space from another—such as geographic, institutional, or spatial divisions. In *The Bell Jar*, such literal borders appear in the form of hospitals, homes, cities, and social institutions that isolate or confine the protagonist. Metaphorically, a border represents the threshold between states of being, identities, or psychological conditions.

It may mark the boundary between sanity and madness, self and other, life and death, or societal conformity and individual rebellion. In this sense, the crisis of border in *The Bell Jar* refers not merely to physical separation but to the collapsing or destabilizing of internal and external divisions that Esther Greenwood experiences as she confronts the limits of her identity, gender roles, and mental health.

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath crafts a narrative that is as much about psychological unravelling as it is about the erosion of clearly defined boundaries. Through the protagonist Esther Greenwood, the novel examines the instability of borders—those that separate mental

stability from breakdown, the self from the body, and the individual from societal expectations. These borders are not static; rather, they shift, blur, and collapse under the weight of Esther's internal conflict and cultural disillusionment.

Plath uses Esther's descent into mental illness and her alienation from prescribed gender roles to highlight how identity, especially female identity in mid-twentieth-century America, is shaped and fractured by the pressures of conformity. The novel ultimately reveals that the breakdown of these borders is not merely a symptom of Esther's psychological crisis, but a broader critique of a society that enforces rigid structures on those who fail—or refuse—to fit within them.

### **Julia Kristeva's Concept of the Abject: Application to Female Experience and Mental Illness**

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, introduced in her seminal work *Powers of Horror* (1982), provides a vital framework for understanding the psychological and existential disruptions experienced by Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*. According to Kristeva, abjection is the reaction to what disturbs identity, system, and order—it is the experience of confronting what is cast out but not entirely separate from the self, such as bodily fluids, waste, or death. These encounters provoke both horror and fascination because they threaten the border between self and other, subject and object, life and death.

Abjection represents a collapse of meaning, a breakdown of the boundary that secures identity. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's mental deterioration, suicidal ideation, and revulsion toward her own body echo this crisis of the abject. Her sense of self becomes destabilized as she confronts aspects of existence—menstruation, sexuality, and mortality—that blur the distinctions between internal and external, clean and unclean, acceptable and taboo. Thus, Kristeva's notion of abjection helps illuminate how Plath portrays the psychological

fragmentation of a woman trapped in a culture that demands a stable, coherent identity where one may not be possible.

According to Kristeva, the abject is that which is expelled from the self in the process of identity formation—it is what one must reject in order to construct a coherent sense of subjectivity. Yet the abject is never fully external; it threatens the boundaries of the self, evoking both disgust and fascination. Bodily fluids, sickness, and death are classic examples of the abject because they blur the distinction between subject and object, self and other. For women, the experience of abjection is intensified by cultural taboos surrounding menstruation, childbirth, and the female body, making the female subject especially vulnerable to psychic fragmentation.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's mental illness can be seen as a response to the pressure of maintaining a socially acceptable identity while internally confronting abject experiences. Her revulsion at the female body, her fear of sexual penetration, and her resistance to traditional female roles (especially motherhood) illustrate a deep discomfort with what Kristeva calls the "maternal chora"—the pre-symbolic, bodily realm associated with the mother that must be rejected for entry into the symbolic order. Esther's suicidal ideation, self-harm, and eventual institutionalization are symptomatic of a subject collapsing under the weight of repressed abjection.

Rather than fully ejecting the abject to stabilize her identity, Esther remains caught in its liminal space, where the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, life and death, become increasingly porous. Through Kristeva's framework, Esther's psychological crisis is not merely a personal breakdown but a symbolic revolt against the imposed order of language, gender, and normativity.

### **Liminality and the Threshold: Victor Turner and Rites of Passage**

The concept of liminality, derived from the Latin word *limen* meaning "threshold," is central to Victor Turner's anthropological analysis of rites of passage. Building on Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model—separation, liminality, and incorporation—Turner emphasizes the liminal phase as a transitional period during which individuals exist in an in-between state, no longer part of their previous identity but not yet reintegrated into a new social role.

This phase is marked by ambiguity, disorientation, and the dissolution of structure, often accompanied by symbolic gestures of death, rebirth, or transformation. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood embodies this liminal condition throughout much of the novel. Her withdrawal from academic, professional, and social life signals a separation from her prior identity as a promising young woman. Her time in psychiatric institutions, suicide attempts, and estrangement from societal norms represent the liminal phase, where she is suspended between madness and recovery, youth and adulthood, social conformity and individual autonomy.

Plath's depiction of Esther's psychological descent aligns with Turner's notion of the liminal subject—what Turner calls the "structurally invisible" individual. Liminal beings are often marginalized or excluded, as Esther is, during her hospitalization and retreat from public life. Moreover, Esther's condition resists easy resolution or reintegration, complicating the reincorporation stage of the rite of passage.

Though she emerges from the asylum and faces a psychiatric review board near the novel's end, the conclusion remains ambivalent, suggesting that the threshold has not been fully crossed. The bell jar may have lifted momentarily, but its shadow still looms. Plath thus reworks Turner's model to reflect the gendered and psychological dimensions of liminality in modern life—particularly for women who reject or fail to meet cultural expectations. Esther's unresolved liminality becomes a metaphor for the pervasive instability of identity in a world that offers few meaningful paths for female transformation outside of patriarchal norms.

In this liminal space, the subject is no longer what they were, but not yet what they will become. This condition of being "betwixt and between" is particularly relevant to Esther Greenwood's journey in *The Bell Jar*, as she continuously inhabits thresholds rather than clear identities. She is suspended between adolescence and adulthood, sanity and madness, death and survival, conformity and rebellion. These transitional states are not productive rites of transformation in the traditional sense; instead, they destabilize her sense of self and intensify her alienation.

Esther's time in New York, her stay in various mental hospitals, and even her suicide attempts can be read as liminal episodes where she is disconnected from both the societal roles expected of her and from any alternative stable identity. She exists in a psychological and social limbo, unable to fully return to normative femininity, yet not fully capable of forging a new, autonomous self. The recurring imagery of mirrors, double selves, and ambiguous boundaries underscores this liminality—she often observes herself as though she were another person, caught between dissociation and self-awareness.

The bell jar itself becomes a potent symbol of liminality: a transparent but suffocating enclosure that separates Esther from the world, neither completely inside nor entirely outside society or reality. Thus, through the lens of liminality, *The Bell Jar* becomes a narrative not of transformation but of entrapment in prolonged thresholds where meaning and identity remain suspended.

### **Feminist Psychoanalysis: Gender Norms and the Fragmentation of the Female Subject in *The Bell Jar***

"I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a baby just because she couldn't say no."

*The Bell Jar*, p. 86

Feminist psychoanalysis, drawing from and critiquing Freudian and Lacanian models, explores how patriarchal ideologies shape the female psyche and construct gendered identities through symbolic and unconscious mechanisms. Thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Nancy Chodorow have argued that traditional psychoanalytic theories often position women as "lack"—defined in opposition to the male norm and confined to roles of passivity, maternity, and silence within the symbolic order.

These restrictive gender norms act as psychological borders, delimiting what women can be, desire, or express. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's crisis is deeply rooted in her inability—or refusal—to conform to these borders. The expectations imposed upon her as a young woman in 1950s America—marriage, motherhood, sexual propriety, and domestic obedience—create a fragmented and conflicting sense of self.

Esther's resistance is evident in her ambivalence toward sex, her horror at the idea of childbirth, and her disdain for the limited career roles available to women. She questions the double standard of sexual behaviour and rejects the notion that her identity must be fulfilled through a man or a family. Her desire to write and live independently collides with societal prescriptions that demand she suppress her intellectual and sexual autonomy.

This internal conflict manifests as psychological distress, suggesting that the madness Esther experiences is not purely internal or pathological, but socially induced—a symptom of inhabiting a world that denies her the freedom to define herself outside patriarchal constructs. As a result, Esther becomes a fractured subject, caught between prescribed femininity and her own emerging selfhood, with no socially sanctioned path to integrate the two. Feminist psychoanalysis thus illuminates how *The Bell Jar* portrays not merely an individual breakdown, but a systemic failure of gender ideology to accommodate female subjectivity.

“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am.”

*The Bell Jar*, p. 199

Mental illness in *The Bell Jar* functions as both a personal affliction and a cultural critique, illustrating how the pressures of conformity and repression can shatter the integrity of the self. The bell jar itself becomes a central metaphor for psychological suffocation and entrapment—an invisible, airtight barrier that isolates Esther from the external world while amplifying her internal chaos. It symbolizes a distorted mental state in which experience is filtered through anxiety, despair, and detachment, effectively sealing her off from meaningful human connection and self-understanding.

As Esther descends into mental illness, her previously stable sense of identity begins to fracture. She no longer recognizes herself in mirrors, feels disconnected from her body, and increasingly experiences her thoughts as fragmented and uncontrollable. This rupture in coherent selfhood marks a crisis of subjectivity, in which the boundaries between Esther’s inner and outer worlds collapse.

Plath deepens this psychological breakdown by blurring the lines between dream, reality, and memory. Esther often shifts between past and present without warning, and her internal monologue moves fluidly between logical reflection and irrational fantasy. This narrative technique destabilizes the reader’s orientation just as Esther’s own sense of time, place, and identity becomes disoriented.

Her hallucinations, suicidal ideation, and obsession with death further dissolve the distinction between the real and the imagined, reinforcing the idea that mental illness distorts not only emotion but the very structures of perception and consciousness. These internal border collapses mirror the broader thematic concern of the novel: the failure of social and psychological systems to support women who resist normative roles. In this sense, Esther’s

mental illness is not only a personal tragedy but a metaphorical revolt—a refusal to maintain the illusion of a coherent self under an oppressive cultural framework.

### **Bodily Abjection and Female Identity**

In *The Bell Jar*, the female body becomes a site of abjection and conflict, central to Esther Greenwood's rejection of traditional womanhood. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection helps to explain Esther's discomfort with the physical processes of the body—especially those associated with femininity, such as menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth. Rather than embracing these experiences as rites of passage into adult womanhood, Esther views them with horror and disgust.

She is repulsed by the idea of giving birth, likening it to a loss of autonomy, and her first experience with menstruation is marked not by initiation but by alienation. Sexuality, too, becomes a threatening and violent act rather than a source of intimacy or pleasure. This rejection of the female body signals a deeper refusal to conform to the symbolic roles assigned to women—mother, wife, caretaker—and underscores her inability to reconcile personal agency with bodily expectations.

The body thus emerges as a battleground where societal norms and individual resistance clash. Esther's repeated suicide attempts—most notably her act of crawling into a crawlspace and taking sleeping pills—can be read as acts of border transgression, attempts to annihilate the bodily vessel through which society imposes identity. By seeking to erase the body, she attempts to escape the confines of gendered subjectivity itself.

In Kristevan terms, Esther's suicidal ideation is an encounter with the abject—a confrontation with death, disorder, and the limits of the self. Rather than enabling her to cross into a new identity, however, these acts only reinforce her entrapment within the bell jar. The abjected body does not liberate; it isolates, intensifying Esther's sense of alienation from both herself and society.

“The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn’t thought about it.”

— *The Bell Jar*, p. 72

Esther’s psychological crisis is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural landscape of 1950s America, where rigid gender norms and class expectations shape and limit women’s possibilities. The tension between traditional female roles—domesticity, marriage, and motherhood—and Esther’s intellectual ambitions creates an irreconcilable conflict. She is aware that her peers are expected to pursue husbands rather than careers, yet she yearns for independence, authorship, and self-definition.

This tension is further exacerbated by class dynamics: though Esther has access to elite education and opportunities, she remains an outsider due to her working-class background. The pressure to assimilate into upper-class femininity—a world of fashion, charm schools, and superficial glamour—only deepens her sense of dislocation and inadequacy.

Plath also explores broader spatial and symbolic dichotomies that act as social borders. The urban/rural divide mirrors Esther’s psychological split: the city offers excitement and ambition but also alienation and surveillance, while the countryside is portrayed as both oppressive and a site of retreat. Similarly, the contrast between academic spaces and domestic life reflects her struggle to choose between intellect and traditional femininity.

Perhaps most symbolically charged is the psychiatric asylum, which serves as a liminal space—separated from conventional society yet governed by its own hierarchies and norms. In the asylum, Esther is no longer subject to mainstream social expectations, yet she is also denied full agency. The institution, while claiming to heal, becomes a reflection of the broader culture’s attempts to discipline and contain deviant female behaviour. Thus, the asylum epitomizes the border space: neither fully outside society nor entirely free from it.

“I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow.”

*The Bell Jar*, p. 144

Esther Greenwood’s identity crisis in *The Bell Jar* is formally mirrored in the novel’s fragmented narration and nonlinear timeline. The narrative voice shifts fluidly between past and present, memory and hallucination, suggesting a consciousness that cannot stabilize itself in a coherent narrative. This disjointed structure reflects Esther’s psychological fragmentation: her inability to construct a unified sense of self is both a symptom and a cause of her mental collapse. Even moments of supposed clarity are undercut by ironic detachment or emotional numbness, indicating that recovery, for Esther, does not equate to reintegration. Instead, the narrative style positions the reader within the blurred boundaries of her mental state, where identity is unstable, and meaning is always in flux.

Esther’s eventual “recovery” remains ambiguous, resisting the typical arc of redemption or resolution. Although she re-enters society and prepares for her final evaluation by the hospital board, the bell jar continues to loom as a persistent metaphor. Its potential to descend again signifies that the boundaries between sanity and madness remain tenuous. Esther has not crossed into a stable new self; rather, she occupies a precarious in-between state where relapse is always possible. Plath deliberately denies the reader a definitive conclusion, challenging the notion that one can ever fully emerge from mental illness or escape the cultural constructs that produce it. In this way, Esther’s reconstruction of identity is partial and unstable—an ongoing negotiation rather than a completed transformation.

The crisis of borders in *The Bell Jar* is essential to understanding both Esther Greenwood’s psychological disintegration and Sylvia Plath’s broader critique of mid-twentieth-century gender norms. Throughout the novel, Esther’s experiences reveal the instability and permeability of the boundaries that supposedly separate sanity from madness,

body from self, private from public, and individual desire from societal expectation. These collapsing borders are not simply metaphors for mental illness; they are the very conditions under which Esther's identity unravels. Her character becomes emblematic of the impossibility of forming a coherent self within a patriarchal culture that demands submission, silence, and self-erasure from women.

The bell jar itself stands as a powerful symbol of this entrapment—transparent yet suffocating, enclosing yet isolating. It captures the paradox of living within a system that makes suffering visible but inexpressible, recognizable but unresolvable. Plath's novel, therefore, functions as both a literary and political act: it exposes how the social, psychological, and bodily borders imposed on women not only constrain but fracture subjectivity. And yet, even within this space of suffering, there is the hint of resistance. Esther's refusal to conform, her rage against maternal and sexual expectations, and her very narration of her experience are acts that defy containment. The border, then, is not only a site of loss but also of potential—a threshold from which new, if precarious, modes of identity might emerge.

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