

BELL

JAR

Cult. and Lit. 3.2 (Advanced English Literature)

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Workshop Goals

The Bell Jar

The student demonstrates knowledge of and insight into the defining characteristics of *The Bell Jar* by using literary terms and feminist critical theory in their analysis. The student analyzes texts and is able to deduce themes of the works and link these to the work's genre, time period, and style.



Workshop Plan

The Bell Jar

Activity 1 (20”)

Esther Greenwood in the 2020s

Activity 2 (10”)

(Semi-)autobiographical novel (lecture)

Activity 3 (20”)

Class discussion

Activity 4 (30”)

Feminist literary analysis

Activity 5 (20”)

White feminism in the novel



Esther Greenwood in the 2020s

Warming-up group activity

- You will be placed into 10 different groups.
- Each group will get two chapters
- Your group must write a tweet (or series of tweets) in Esther's account (@esthergreenwood_NYC). You will work together for 10 minutes. Once finished you will share your tweets.
- Group 1: chs. 1-2; Group 2: chs. 3-4; Group 3: chs. 5-6; Group 4: chs. 7-8; Group 5: chs. 9-10; Group 6: 11-12; Group 7: 13-14; Group 8: 15-16; Group 9: 17-18; Group 10: 19-20
- Once you are done, add your tweets to the group chat.

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Transcending genres

The Bell Jar

- Bildungsroman
- Auto-biographical fiction
- Feminist literary fiction



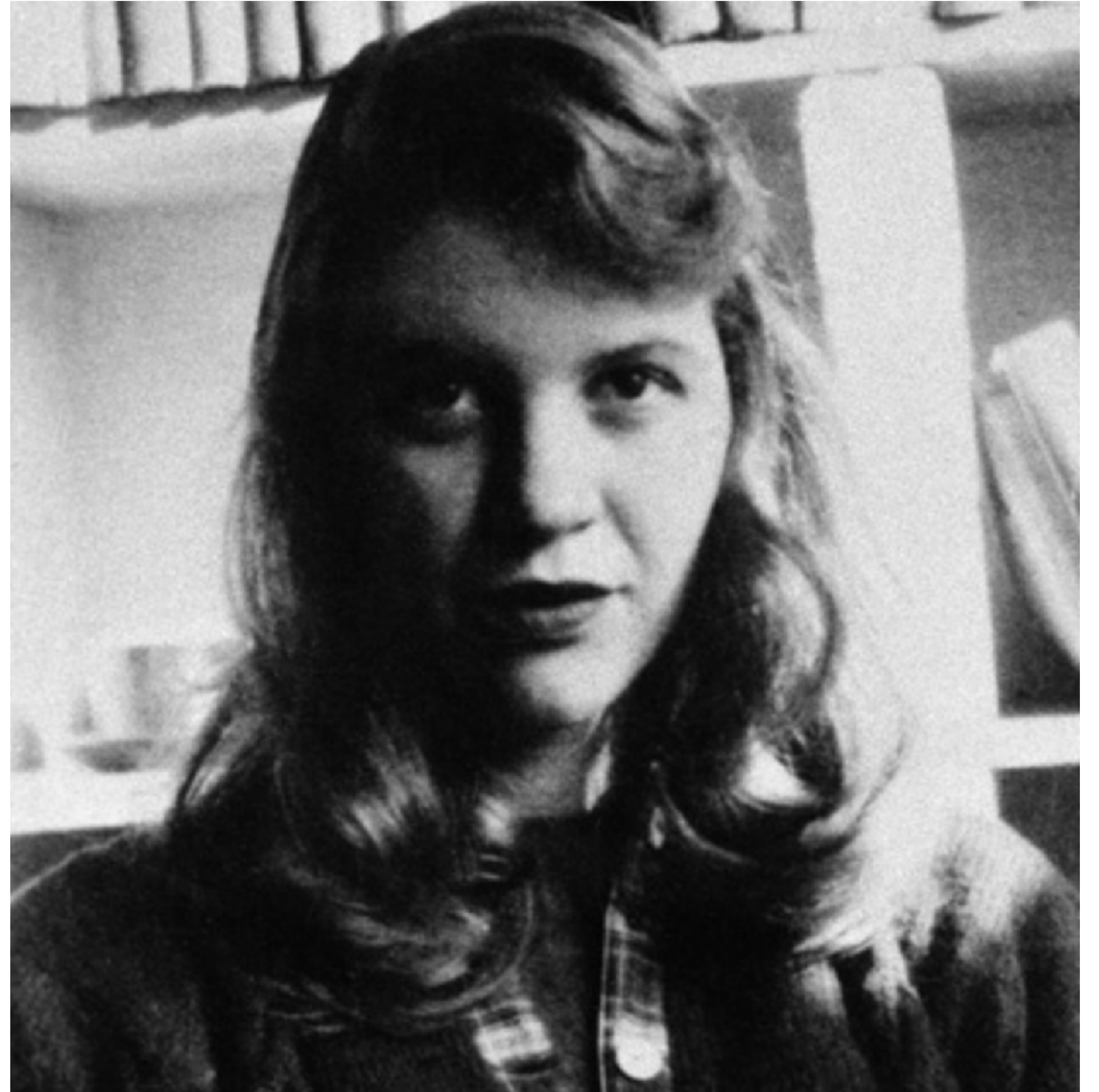
Autobiographical fiction

literary genre

Autobiographical fiction (literary genre): autobiographical fiction is any work of fiction that is based on the real life events of the author.

Autobiographical fiction is based on fact—but, importantly, not bound by fact.

Autobiographical fiction is not the same as a memoir or an autobiography.





Sylvia Plath's Life

1932-1963

- Born Massachusetts; died London
- Father died in 1940 when she was nine.
- Attended college in Massachusetts, then in London.
- Married British poet Ted Hughes in 1956.
- Suffered from clinical depression and underwent electro-shock therapy. Struggled with mental health issues.
- Suicide in 1963.





1950s

The 1950s and *The Bell Jar*



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**What similarities and differences are there
between Sylvia Plath and Esther
Greenwood? How biographical is this work?**

**The title of the book is *The Bell Jar*,
what does the bell jar symbolize (or
mean) to the book's main character?**

**What are Esther's feelings for
Buddy? Why does she feel
conflicted by him?**

Two of Esther's friends in the novel are Dorine and Joan. What are Esther's feelings towards these characters?

One of the most important symbols in the book is the fig tree (chapter 7). What does this symbol mean to Esther? Is this still the case for women today? What has changed?

In the end, Esther seems to get better, why do you think she recovered: the treatment, or her own will? What does this say about Plath's view on psychiatric medicine?

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Feminist literary critique

definition

- **Feminist Literary Criticism:** Feminist criticism is concerned with "the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 83). This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and aims to expose misogyny in writing about women, which can take explicit and implicit forms. This misogyny, Tyson reminds us, can extend into diverse areas of our culture: "Perhaps the most chilling example...is found in the world of modern medicine, where drugs prescribed for both sexes often have been tested on male subjects only" (85).
- Lois Tyson - *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 2nd ed., 2006.

Discussions in groups

Feminism in *The Bell Jar*

- The students will be split up into three (or six) groups. Each group will receive three questions that they will have to answer in **10 minutes to answer**. They must then prepare a **2 to 3-minute explanation of their questions** – these will be shared with the group.
- Group 1: How is the relationship between men and women portrayed? What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)? How are male and female roles defined?
- Group 2: What constitutes masculinity and femininity? How do characters embody these traits? Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others' reactions to them?
- Group 3: While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (scales of masculine and feminine). How is this the case in the novel? Feminism is also intersectional. What role do people of color play in the novel? What does this say about the feminism in the book?

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White Feminism in *The Bell Jar*

A critique of the novel

For this activity, the students will read [a poignant rebuke of the novel written by Crystal Contreras of the Willamette Weekly](#). Contreras believes that “[*The Bell Jar* is] just another embodiment of white feminism, which is label for a certain type of feminism that focuses on the safety and comfort of white, middle and upper middle class [sic] women at the expense of women of color and other marginalized people.” She argues that it’s maybe “time to rethink *The Bell Jar*’s feminist credentials, or at the very least reclassify it as a problematic favorite, especially since stereotypes are rooted in racial bias and don't exist outside of a historical context.”

- Individually - take 5 minutes to read the article (link in chat and on Moodle)
- In groups - Discuss for 10 minutes whether or not they agree with her, and whether or not they believe the book is worth reading? Can a book be a product of white feminism and still worthwhile?
- Entire class - Share your answers (5-minute quick recap).