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## Deconstructing Plath's "The Bell Jar"

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# Deconstructing Plath's "The Bell Jar"

## John Howard Birss, Jr. Memorial Lecture examines the writing process and life of Sylvia Plath

March 5, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

For the haunting portrayal of the descent into insanity that is "The Bell Jar," author [Sylvia Plath](#) was both disciplined enough to write 1,000 words a day and a touch romantic in penning it on pink paper.

Plath stole the pink paper from her alma mater, Smith College, because "she thought it would give her novel a rose cast," said [Karen V. Kukil](#), Smith's associate curator of special collections, including the college's collection of Plath's writings. Kukil offered insight into Plath's writing process and life for the [13<sup>th</sup> Annual Professor John Howard Birss, Jr. Memorial Lecture Series](#), celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "The Bell Jar." Each academic year this series offers the opportunity to study in depth a single text and to investigate why such significant literary works as "Moby Dick," "Huckleberry Finn" and "Walden" remain relevant to modern readers.

Perhaps Plath needed that rosy cast in order to divulge some of her most intimate thoughts and experiences in the semi-autobiographical novel that was largely based on her struggle with depression and whose characters were unabashed facsimiles of her mother, a close friend and a college sweetheart. Famous for her confessional style of writing prose and poetry – as well as the fact that she attempted suicide several times before taking her own life at age 30 – Plath shared many experiences with her main character, Esther Greenwood – an overbearing mother, an unfulfilling guest editorship at a renowned women's magazine in New York City, an obsession with suicide and improperly administered electroshock treatments.

"'The Bell Jar' is one of the most powerful portrayals of madness in fiction," Kukil said in her lecture. "She had the courage to follow her talents to the light as well as the dark places it led."

Plath's disciplined approach to writing certainly worked for her. On advice from a writer's handbook, she committed to putting down 1,000 words a day and completed a first draft in five months in 1961. She kept progress reports that analyzed plot and character actions – unusual for a writer, Kukil noted – and detailed handwritten outlines that reveal how she linked actions to ideas.

Her inspiration for "The Bell Jar"? According to Kukil it was a 1950s article in "Cosmopolitan" magazine called "Psychiatry and Beauty" that suggested that beauty treatments will heal mentally ill women. (It was, typically for the time, written by a man.)

Almost a decade before she started writing her novel, Plath summed up her struggle with depression in a letter to her friend Marcia Brown: "It's quite amazing how I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarified atmosphere under a bell jar."

According to Kukil, she felt suffocated by what she perceived as needing to choose between being a mother and wife or a famous author.

“Plath wanted it all, as it said in her journals: ‘books, babies and beef stews,’” Kukil explained. “Plath’s great sin was to be ambitious and want more than the narrowly defined roles for women.”

While the novel debuted with a meager print run of 2,000 copies in England in 1963, “The Bell Jar” has had an enduring impact there as well as in the U.S. The first American printing in 1971 earned a spot on the New York Times bestseller list for 24 weeks, and its second and third printings sold out quickly.

By the novel’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, more than 2 million copies had sold, and it’s been translated into over 30 languages. Perhaps most telling is that Kukil, editor of two collections of Plath’s journal entries and co-author of a book about Plath’s contentious life with British poet Ted Hughes, receives about 500 email inquiries a year about Plath.

“I find that most readers respect Plath’s honesty and selflessness in writing about illness,” Kukil said.

That unforgiving honesty is illustrated in Plath’s description of Esther’s electroshock treatment in “The Bell Jar”:

*I shut my eyes. There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.*

A special library exhibition, “Sylvia Plath and ‘The Bell Jar,’” is open to the public in the lobby of the University Library. Collection Development and Acquisitions Librarian Christine Fagan curated the exhibit in cooperation with Karen Kukil. It features first editions of the book, a manual typewriter owned by Plath, original typescripts and a certified copy of Plath’s death certificate, among other items. The exhibition is open daily during the library’s operating hours through Tuesday, March 12.

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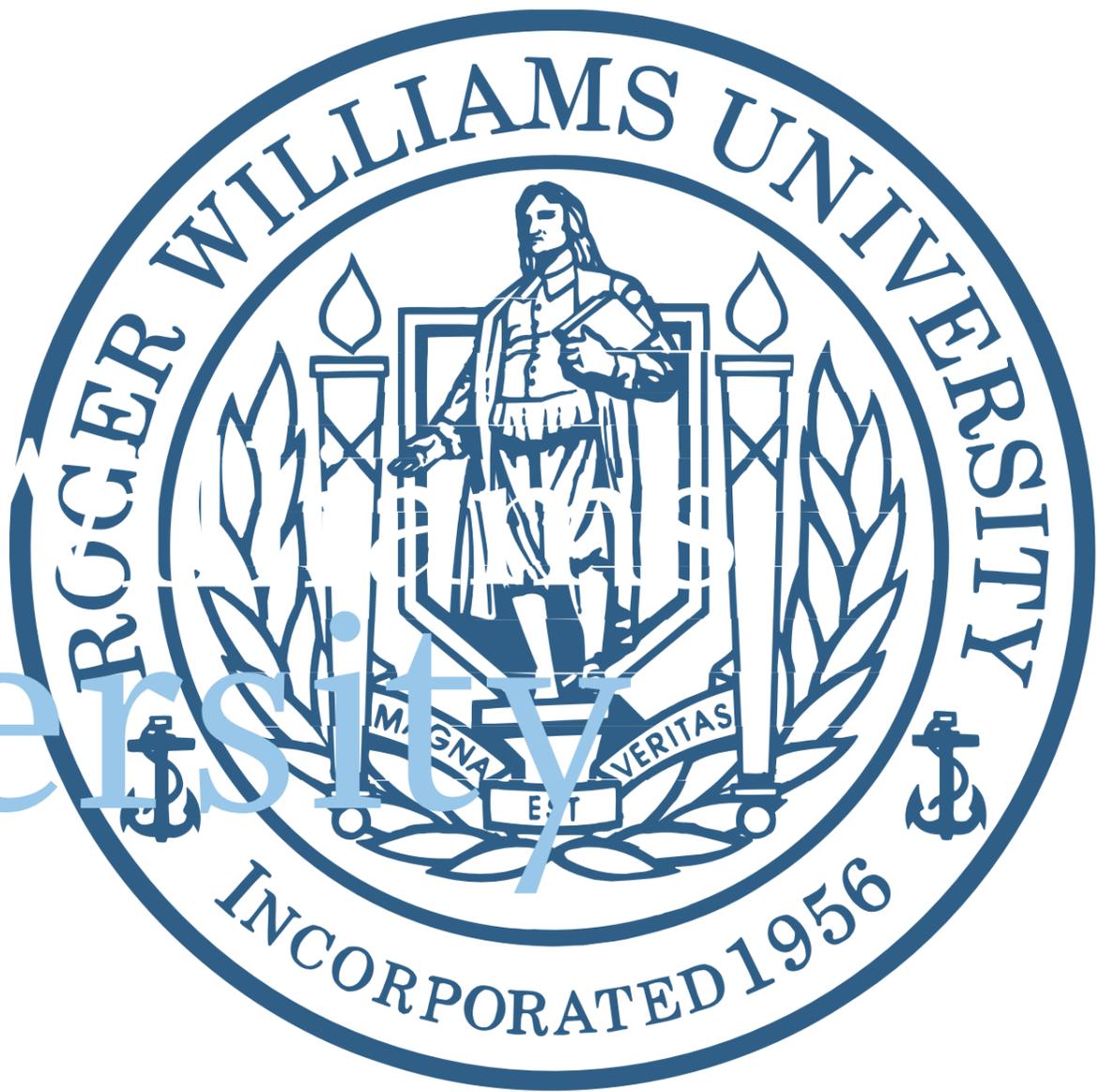
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