**From what particular mental illness does Esther Greenwood seem to be suffering?**

As Frances McCullogh notes in her foreword to the novel, Esther’s illness has never been diagnosed, but many knowledgeable critics have determined that Plath is presenting an incredibly accurate picture of schizophrenia. Consider the following symptoms of the family of disorders we have come to refer to as *schizophrenia*:

**Paranoid delusions** (two types)

1. delusions of grandeur—The sufferer might fancy himself or herself to be Jesus Christ, Napoleon, the Virgin Mary, etc. Clearly this does not appear to be present in Esther’s case.
2. delusions of persecution— The sufferer might suspect that others are plotting against or planning to hurt him / her in some way. This *does* enter into this particular case; review these particular passages:

**Hallucinations**

**Illusions**—The fact that Esther cannot read because the letters on the page start to jump and stretch and move is interesting. Psychologists would term this an *illusion*.

**(note: They would not call this a delusion because the letters actually do exist on the page. When a patient’s perception of an actual item (one that actually exists and is present) becomes distorted, this is an illusion on his / her part. When they see something that is not actually present, their perception of that item is a *delusion* (not based in reality). You should think of an *illusion* as a perceptual *distortion*.)**

Another example would be hallways that suddenly become narrow tunnels or confining corridors**.**

**Ideas of reference**—This is the case when the patient perceives that innocuous situations, gestures, phenomena, etc. have direct reference to him / herself. (increased paranoia) Review page 133 (line 27) to page 134 (line 10).

**Insomnia**

**Degradation in hygiene** (refusal to bathe)

**Loose associations** (two types):

1. cognitive—*Cognition* refers to thought processes. Loose associations affecting cognition concern the random and often illogical flow of thoughts running through the mind of the patient. This confusing procession of thoughts and random connections make it impossible to follow the patient’s conversation.
2. affective—This is a similar type of conflict between subject and object, but the focus is not on cognition (thought) but instead on emotion.

**Rebirth through Suffering**

* We might take Esther’s objection to children as a rejection of life, birth of course being the beginning, rather than the restful end, of life.
* She may not wish to continue the pattern of pain and disappointment that she has experienced in her own life.
* But her objections may, at least in part, be much simpler; the whole process frightens her. Here is a girl-woman who is in the process of discovering herself; giving birth to another human being would take this attention away from self and project it in an entirely different direction.

Ch. 6 - Esther’s thoughts about the drug administered to the woman giving birth:

* she reflects that this drug, which cheats a woman by causing her to forget her pain, must have been developed by a man.
* This “jab” at men notwithstanding, one must wonder why Esther would think that anyone would relish pain of this sort.
* She says that the woman is clearly feeling the pain when she is giving birth, so the only possible benefit of remembering the pain would be the prevention of future pregnancies.
* Otherwise, she must mean that pain is simply a treasure to be cherished. This latter reason works well as support for the theme of **rebirth through pain and suffering**.
* *After that, Buddy took me out into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born.*
* Here we have the themes of birth and death intertwined.

The Birth…

* Blood associated with birth and sex
* Ritualistic blood sacrifice (quote too graphic for this early!)

Central Significance of Esther’s Experience on Mount Pisgah

* The injury affords Esther another chance at **rebirth through suffering**.
* It seems that injury, pain, and suffering brings Esther a feeling of renewal—a fresh chance to live.
* Of course, we cannot forget the cleansing fresh start afforded by the broth.
* Consider how Esther enjoyed being taken care of when she had food poisoning…

Birth Ch. 14

**Esther as a “baby”**

Plath’s description of her experience here resembles a description of a child in the womb—or perhaps a child leaving the womb. Consider the following bits of text:

 *It was completely dark.* *I was being transported . . .down a tunnel* *a slit of light opened like a mouth or a wound* *hands wrapped around my limbs*

*The light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried. “Mother!”* *Air breathed and played over my face.* *If I opened my eyes, I would see colors and shapes bending in upon me like nurses.*

At first this whole passage may seem to support the theme of **rebirth through suffering**, but when Esther’s brother asks her, “How are you?,” she responds, “The same.” In other words, there does not appear to have been any cessation of pain.