

## A Critical Study Of Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar'

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**Abstract** - Sylvia Plath's 1964 novel, **The Bell Jar**, first released in 1963, addresses the issue of female exploitation that is fundamental to the institution of marriage. It seems like women are being protected by this organization. Male members claim that the organization was established to defend women. The goal is to get them into the workforce and out of the house. More specifically, it was meant to reassure males and keep women in their households. The idea is to provide men with a tidy, well-maintained, calm, and pleasant home to come home to after a long day at work. According to this viewpoint, males are assigned dominant jobs, and women are submissive ones. **The Bell Jar** is a highly autobiographical novel that unveils Plath's seemingly perfect life, underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father Otto Plath. The novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, shares many similarities with Plath, including her inability to adapt to New York City, her attempt to commit suicide by taking an excess dose of sleeping pills, and her period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy. This paper will critical analysis of **The Bell Jar** from a feminist standpoint, highlighting the dual perceptions that women have of themselves in public: as mad or as feminine. This paper also argues that, despite some research linking her insanity to her rejection of femininity, her rejection of femininity is an intentional decision that leads to artistic freedom.

**Introduction** - Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 and grew up on the Massachusetts coast. Her father died when she was eight. A stellar student, Plath won scholarships to attend Smith and Cambridge University, where she met and married the poet Ted Hughes. They had a rocky marriage and two children. Plath won great acclaim for her first book of poetry, *The Colossus*, in 1959, and published the pseudonymous *The Bell Jar* in 1963 to make money. Plath had suffered from mental illness throughout her life and she fell into deep depression as her marriage dissolved, eventually committing suicide in 1963. Several books of her poetry published after her death display Plath's genius and won her a posthumous Pulitzer Prize. Plath's works are still widely read today.

In the summer of 1953, Esther Greenwood, a brilliant college student, wins a month to work as a guest editor with eleven other girls at a New York magazine. Esther lives with the other girls at the Amazon, a women's hotel, and attends a steady stream of events and parties hosted by the magazine. Though Esther knows she should be enjoying herself, she feels only numb and detached from the old ambitious self that her boss, editor Jay Cee, tries to motivate. Esther vacillates between wanting to be wholesome, like her friend Betsy, and wanting to break all rules, like her friend Doreen. She worries about the rigid expectations of virginity, maternity, and wifeliness that society (and her mother) holds for young women and feels

paralyzed by her contradictory desires for her future. She goes on a string of bad dates, the best of which feels anticlimactic when Constantin, an interpreter, makes no romantic advances and the worst of which ends with the misogynistic Marco trying to rape her.

Throughout her time in New York, Esther flashes back to her troubled relationship with Buddy Willard, a handsome know-it-all medical student who Esther once admired and is now disgusted by, having realized Buddy is a hypocrite for projecting a virginal public image even after he's had a sexual affair. Buddy is currently suffering from TB, but Esther plans to break up with him as soon as he gets better. On her last visit to the sanatorium, she rejected Buddy's marriage proposal and broke her leg skiing.

Esther Greenwood begins her reminiscence of the summer of 1953 when she won a contest to live in New York for a month as the guest editor of a fashion magazine. Though Esther knows she should feel accomplished and grateful for the opportunity to work in New York, she instead feels numb and detached from her own life. She is obsessed with the electrocution of the Rosenbergs (a married couple executed for being Soviet spies). She feels all her college achievements have "fizzled to nothing" in New York and that she is "very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel. Esther introduces herself as a person in flux, no longer able to enjoy the fruits of her old ambitions (like her college achievements) or to value what society

expects her to value (like the opportunity to spend a summer working in New York). The metaphor of the tornado is at once an image of stable purity (a still, empty center) and an image of filth and chaos (the swirling dust and matter the tornado swirls around that center)."<sup>1</sup>

**The Bell JAR:** The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath tells the story of a gifted young woman's mental breakdown beginning during a summer internship as a junior editor at a magazine in New York City in the early 1950s. It was first published in January 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas and later published under her real name. This highly autobiographical novel unveils Plath's seemingly perfect life, underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father Otto Plath. The novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, shares many similarities with Plath, including her inability to adapt to New York City, her attempt to commit suicide by taking an excess dose of sleeping pills, and her period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy. The real Plath committed suicide in 1963, leaving behind this scathingly sad, honest, and perfectly written book, which remains one of the best-told tales of a woman's descent into insanity. The first sentence of *The Bell Jar* alerts the reader to the conflicts that will be dealt with in the novel – "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York"<sup>1</sup>. Like Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, the young college girl Esther is experiencing an adolescent crisis. The Bell Jar examines the question of socially acceptable identity. It examines Esther's "quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be". Esther is expected to become a self-sufficient woman and self-sacrificing wife-mother, without any option to attain independence. Esther feels she is a prisoner to domestic duties and fears the loss of her inner self.

The novel tells the story of Esther's coming of age, but it does not follow the usual trajectory of adolescent development into adulthood. Instead of undergoing a progressive education in the ways of the world, culminating in an entrance into adulthood, Esther regresses into madness. Experiences intended to be life-changing in a positive sense: Esther's first time in New York City, her first marriage proposal, her success in college, her love flicks – upsets her and disorients her. Instead of finding a new meaning in life, Esther urges to die. Esther observes a gap between what societies say she should experience and what she does experience. This gap intensifies her madness. Society expects women of Esther's age and station to act cheerful, flexible, and confident and Esther feels she must repress her natural gloom, cynicism, and dark humor. She feels she cannot discuss or think about the dark spots in life that plague her: personal failure, suffering, and death. She knows that the world of fashion she inhabits in New York City should make her feel glamorous and happy, but she finds it filled with poison, drunkenness, and violence.

Her relationships with men are supposed to be romantic and meaningful, but they are marked by misunderstanding, distrust, and brutality. Esther almost continuously feels that her actions are wrong, or that she is the only one to view the world as she does, and eventually, she begins to feel a sense of unreality. This sense grows till it becomes unbearable and attempted suicide and madness follow.

*The bell jar* is an inverted glass jar, generally used to display an object of scientific curiosity, containing a certain kind of inert gas or vacuum. For Esther, the bell jar symbolizes madness. When gripped by insanity, she feels that she is inside an airless glass jar that distorts her perspective on the world and prevents her from connecting with people around her. At the end of the novel, the bell jar has been lifted, but she can sense that it still hovers over her, waiting to drop at any moment. The bell jar could mean the society's stifling constraints and befuddling mixed messages that trap Esther. The metaphorical denotation of the physical and mental suffocation caused by the bell jar is a direct representation of Esther's mental suffocation by the unavoidable settling of depression upon her psyche. The psychoanalytic principles, propounded by Freud and developed by many of his followers can be used to analyse the issues that the novel problematizes. The basic tenets of psychoanalysis expound that a person's development is determined by often forgotten events in early childhood rather than inherited traits alone. Human attitudes, mannerisms, experiences, and thoughts are largely influenced by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious.

This aspect may explain Esther's complex relationship with her father and other men she came across. Esther seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards her father, one of both hatred and submission. The lack of a father figure during the time of her psychosexual development may have caused her abnormal response to relationships, sexuality, etc. Freud calls the "force by which the sexual instinct is represented in the mind"<sup>2</sup> the Libido. This term should be understood broadly, and not as being restricted only to sexual relations, that is, Libido refers to various kinds of sexual pleasures and gratifications. According to Freud, all individuals pass through four stages in their development: the oral, the anal, the phallic, and the genital. During infancy and childhood, an individual's sexual life is rich but dissociated and unfocused. Focus occurs at puberty. Esther in *The Bell Jar* displays the Oedipus Complex. The Oedipus complex is at the core of neurosis for Freud. According to psychoanalytic theory, every individual passes through a stage in which he/she desires the parent of the opposite sex- of course, on an unconscious level. In little boys, this is aided by unconscious fear of castration – castration anxiety- and in little girls, it is aided by jealousy of men and what is termed penis envy.<sup>3</sup>

**Critical Analysis of the Novel :** "*The Bell Jar*" is about the way this country was in the 1950s and about the way it is to

lose one's grip on sanity and recover it again. It is easy to say (and it is said too often) that insanity is the only sane reaction to the America of the past two decades. And it is also said that the only thing to do about madness is relax and enjoy it. But neither of these "clever" responses to her situation occur to Esther Greenwood, who is the narrator and central character in this novel.

To Esther, madness is the descent of a stifling bell jar over her head. In this state, she says, "Wherever I sat ... I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my sour air."<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Esther believes the world outside the asylum is full of people living an authentic existence. She asks, "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort."<sup>5</sup> The world in which the events of this novel take place is a world bounded by the Cold War on one side and the sexual war on the other. We follow Esther Greenwood's personal life from her summer job in New York with "Ladies' Day" magazine, back through her days at New England's largest school for women, and forward through her attempted suicide, her bad treatment at one asylum and her good treatment at another, to her final re-entry into the world like a used tire: "patched, retreaded and approved for the road."<sup>6</sup> But this personal life is delicately related to larger events — especially the execution of the Rosenbergs, whose impending death by electrocution is introduced in the stunning first paragraph of the book. Ironically, that same electrical power that destroys the Rosenbergs, restores Esther to life. It is shock therapy that finally lifts the bell jar and enables Esther to breathe freely once again. Passing through death she is reborn. This novel is not political or historical in any narrow sense, but in looking at the madness of the world and the world of madness it forces us to consider the great question posed by all truly realistic fiction: What is reality and how can it be confronted?

Sylvia Plath's technique of defamiliarization ranges from tiny verbal witticisms that bite, to deeply troubling images. When she calls the hotel for women that Esther inhabits in New York the "Amazon," she is not merely enjoying the closeness of the sound of that word to "Barbizon," she is forcing us to rethink the entire concept of a hotel for women: "mostly girls of my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure that their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them."<sup>7</sup> And she is announcing a major theme in her work, the hostility between men and women.

At its essence, *The Bell Jar* is an exploration of the divide between mind and body. This exploration unfolds most visibly in the development of Esther's mental illness, which she experiences as an estrangement of her mind from her body. As her illness amplifies, Esther loses control over her body, becoming unable to sleep, read, eat, or write in her handwriting. She frequently catches her body making

sounds or engaging in actions that... Esther remains preoccupied with questions of purity and impurity throughout the novel, framing them in different terms at different points in her development. She thinks about purity of body as well as purity of mind. Indeed, Esther often speaks of purity as a kind of spiritual transcendence that can be accessed through the transcendence of the body. At the novel's start, she admires the clearness of vodka and imagines that drinking it into her body will purify...

Esther remains preoccupied with questions of purity and impurity throughout the novel, framing them in different terms at different points in her development. She thinks about purity of body as well as purity of mind. Indeed, Esther often speaks of purity as a kind of spiritual transcendence that can be accessed through the transcendence of the body. At the novel's start, she admires the clearness of vodka and imagines that drinking it into her body will purify... ***The Bell Jar*** offers an in-depth meditation on womanhood and presents a complex, frequently disturbing portrait of what it meant to be female in 1950s America. Esther reflects often on the differences between men and women as well as on the different social roles they are expected to perform. Most of her reflections circulate about sex and career. Esther's interactions with other female characters in the novel further complicate these reflections by presenting different stances.

The bell jar symbolizes mental illness and gives the novel its title. It is Esther's metaphor for describing what she feels like while suffering her nervous breakdown: no matter what she is doing. *The Bell Jar* is set in 1950s America, a time when American society was predominantly shaped by conservative values and patriarchal structures. It was a society that placed particular restraints on women as it expected them to embody traditional ideals of purity and chastity and to aspire to the life of a suburban mother and homemaker rather than pursuing their careers. Many women, like Esther Greenwood, felt crushed by the expectations that 1950s American society placed on them. Their resentment of these pressures was one of the motivating forces that inspired the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Though *The Bell Jar* is a classic American coming-of-age novel, Plath's most highly regarded works are her books of poetry, including *The Colossus*, *Ariel*, and *Collected Poems*. These poems share some of the themes of *The Bell Jar* as they explore issues of mortality, sanity, and womanhood, but they are ultimately much wider-ranging than the novel and present a complex, intricate vision of many sorts of life experiences. Mirrors symbolize identity and Esther's reflection in and relation to mirrors throughout the novel follows the loss of her healthy self to mental illness. Esther's inability to recognize herself in the elevator reflection at psychological.

**Conclusion:** Esther Greenwood's account of her year in *The Bell Jar* is as clear and readable as it is witty and disturbing. Why, then, has this extraordinary work not

appeared in the United States until eight years after its appearance in England? Sylvia Plath's mother has insisted that her daughter thought of the book as a "potboiler" and did not want it published in the United States. Mrs. Plath herself felt that the book presented ungrateful caricatures of people who had tried to help her daughter. These sentiments are understandable. But a book published in England cannot be kept away from the United States. Already, the student underground has been smuggling copies from abroad into the country. The literature will be out. And "**The Bell Jar**" is not a potboiler, nor a series of ungrateful caricatures; it is literature. It is finding its audience and will hold it. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther describes the relationship between mind and body as one in which each imprisons the other. The mind traps the body literally; it gets Esther locked in a psychiatric hospital. But at the same time, the body traps the mind. It has "little tricks" to prevent her from killing herself. She calls the body "a cage" that

prevents the mind from extinguishing itself. "If only there was something wrong with my body",<sup>8</sup> she tells her nurses. She views the problems of her mind as different from the problems of her body.

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