

A trapped life: the autobiographical elements of sylvia plath's the bell jar



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People go through a vast range of events as they travel through life and face various obstacles.

These obstacles differ from person to person and can sometimes seem impossible to surmount. Society is one of the prevailing sources of these obstacles and it occasionally can put overwhelming pressures on a person's soul and can be detrimental to the body leading to suicidal deaths. Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* describes the effect of these pressures on the body and soul. As Stevenson states: “..

. its [*The Bell Jar's*] theme is her own traumatic breakdown and suicide attempt at 21. Plath's life was filled with many societal pressures that led her to depression. However, “ Self-consciousness and anxiety about status and money during adolescence contributed to the profound insecurity Plath concealed all her life beneath a facade of brassy energy and brilliant achievement” (Stevenson).

Ronald DeFeo believes her depth into human emotions and her innovative style attracts readers and that “ we also read them [Plath's work] because we wish to share the poet's grief” (DeFeo 624). Many artists pull from their own life experiences to create their works, and many people believe that you can not write about life unless you have lived it to the fullest. Plath understood first hand when it came to how people feel under societies great pressures. Plath is intensely expressive in her novel and wishes to show the reader the torment she and others like her have gone through. Plath did not hold back when she wrote her novel *The Bell Jar* but instead let every emotion flow from her soul, through her hands, and onto the page (West 8).

Stevenson wrote, “ A fanatical preoccupation with death and rebirth informs her sad, cynical novel, *The Bell Jar*”.

Her own life experiences and every obstacle she faced gave her the voice to write such an accurate view of her character’s feelings. She used her own emotions to give depths to the characters (DeFeo 624). In *The Bell Jar* Sylvia Plath, because of her own life experiences, has a great insight as to how people feel; feelings of confinement, descending into madness, and the struggles of adolescents are themes that are investigated throughout the author’s novel. A sense of confinement is prevalent throughout Plath’s novel. The girl trapped under the bell jar symbolizes Esther’s suffocation.

Plath wrote about several instances in which Esther imagines herself as confined, including when she compares herself to a character in a short story and imagines herself trapped in a tree, unable to decide which fig (each representing a different career path) to choose. Diane Bond wrote, “ As Paula Bennett has written, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* offers a brilliant evocation of the ‘ oppressive atmosphere of the 1950’s and the soul destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young woman like Plath’” (Bond 49). When Esther is in the mental hospital, she wants to escape, and sees others wanting to escape, but cannot because of the barred windows. This is the only instance when she is literally trapped; the other instances in which this theme is visible are imaginary, demonstrating that Esther’s sense of confinement is largely mental. The sense that she is trapped is the most obvious display of her mental illness. The story of a girl trapped under the Bell Jar mimics the life of Sylvia Plath, which gave the author insight as to how her characters with these conditions might feel.

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Sylvia Plath wrote in her journals that when you step into the real world you realize “ there is no security, no artifice to stop the unsavory changes, the rat race... the devil in the clock” (Plath “ Journals” 80). Plath explains her life through Esther who goes insane and does not want to live any more because she is tired of trying to be something that everyone wants her to be.

The biography of Sylvia Plath, her journey of becoming a writer, and becoming a responsible woman, reflects the internal struggle that Esther is facing. Plath’s journals were filled with depressing lines such as, “ Is anyone anywhere happy? No, not unless they are living in a dream” (Plath “ Journals” 80). She is trapped within herself and cannot seem to find a path through her struggles. A great deal of the novel concerns the expectations that others have for Esther with regards to behavior and her future, as well as the expectations that Esther has for others.

Since Esther feels the people around her are causing her to break down Esther decides that if she was untouched and confined she would be normal once again. This is most explicit in the societal expectations that Esther feels concerning decisions about a possible career and family. Esther feels the only way to recover is to remove herself from society. “ The Bell Jar vividly illustrates that collusion by proposing, through its representation of Esther’s recovery, an ideal of a self uncontaminated by others” (Bonds 49). Esther feels that she is pressured to succeed in whatever career she chooses, despite the fact that she cannot yet decide which career path she will pursue.

In addition, Esther also feels pressured about the proper codes of behavior, particularly with regard to sexuality. Since Esther did not believe in these codes and did not agree with others around her she felt confined into her own world and trapped under a bell jar. Sylvia Plath could describe these feelings to an exact precision because she too experienced the social pressure of achieving greatness and the Puritan idea that hard work will give everlasting salvation (Plath "Journals" 85). She is constantly monitored by others, including her mother, who gives her a pamphlet on female sexuality, and even her neighbors, such as Mrs. Ockenden, who spies on her and reports back any indiscretions (Plath "TBJ" 123).

"Yet all of Sylvia's [or Esther's] defenses, however neurotic, did prevent any extended periods of dangerous despair, as her whirlwind assault upon the world's good opinion externalized or temporarily diverted many dark undercurrents" (Butscher "Woman and Work" 14). Plath knew precisely how Esther felt because of her own life experiences. "Taken separately each episode of the plot is a close-to-documentary account of something that did happen in the author's life" (Hughes 5). Plath knew exactly how her confined character felt because she too was trapped under the bell jar.

Plath was descending into madness and falling into a deep depression but "her long-nursed ambition to write an objective novel about life was a more urgent need" (Hughes 8). She obtained her goal and defeated many obstacles with an achievement of a lifetime. Her novel *The Bell Jar* is beyond accuracy to a point where one critic stated that Plath wrote "... with a passion for minute accuracy in recording the physical, and not afraid to be caustic or discordant" (West 8).

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West also wrote, “ She has a way of putting catastrophe casually, without frills, and you wince at the zombie decorum with which she does it. ” Plath could write with such an innovative style because it was second nature to her; it was her life written out into a novel. Butscher suggests a less romantic motivation: “ The Bell Jar is autobiographical because, as I have consistently maintained, Sylvia’s narcissistic imagination was almost totally incapable of inventing narrative and characters. ” She could write the novel because she was writing about what she knew, which is an imperative necessity to a great novelist.

On the other hand if madness is a form of insight and itself a comment on its causes, then effective expression of it may achieve success in art, if not in life” (Wagner “ Critical Essays” 38). Plath understood the feelings that associate themselves with insanity because she herself was indeed going insane. When writing about The Bell Jar, Wagner wrote, “...

the novel throws open the social dimension of madness, indication of the culture in which the heroine [Esther] has grown up, or rather which prevents her from doing so” (Wagner “ Critical Essays” 35). Plath had many social problems and was eventually descending into madness. Butscher describes Plath’s life in his book Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work and wrote, “ Then as she went to speak, she moved suddenly, viciously, ripped at the [phone] cord and pulled the telephone off the wall. What she did next is not fully clear.

Without letting Mrs. Plath [Sylvia’s Mother] know... Sylvia took the baby and ran from the house..

. ” (Butscher “ Woman and Work” 352). Clearly she was not mentally balanced and had problems controlling her insanity. Wagner speaks for many people when she writes, “..

. she [Plath] had permitted herself emotions which for me were forbidden, and which I spent a considerable amount of effort attempting to repress. ” Sylvia Plath let her emotions free to write her novel *The Bell Jar*, and her emotions and life gave her a great insight as to how her characters might feel. She manipulated her experiences to produce a great work of art: But she [Plath] had also said earlier, ‘ I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying-like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. ’ (Butscher “ Woman and work” 374) Plath used her madness with “ an informed and intelligent mind” to cause her characters to evolve, to understand how people feel thus she could understand how her characters might feel because she has experienced many of the events that her main character Esther experienced in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

But contemporaries who knew Sylvia more intimately recollect a more complex and credible personality, a driven girl obviously torn between a constant need for public admiration and a less acceptable compulsion to leave her mark upon the world at any cost, an occasionally neurotic, usually affected young lady... ” (Butscher “ Woman and Work” 10).

Whether neurotic or not, Plath captures the essence of her characters emotions in her novel. In writing about *The Bell Jar* Kate Moses stated, “ The Plath that emerges here is paradoxically at once saner-less a creature of willful mental excess-and more buffeted by forces beyond her control. The events in Plath’s life are parallel to the events that Esther faces in the novel. Plath wrote from her own life experiences and understood the descent into madness because she her self eventually went mad.

In writing about Plath’s falling out, Wagner stated, “ This depression that was endemic in her father’s family troubled her during her junior year; when her mother sought treatment for her she was given BI-Polar electroconvulsive shock treatments as an out-patient. ” Eventually a light is shown for Plath and she returns back to school and in the novel Esther also returns to school: After several months, she is to return to school. As she recovers, she uses the apt analogy of the distorted view of the world seen from within a bell jar to describe her former condition. Esther states near the close of the book ‘ How did I know that someday-at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere-the bell jar, with it’s stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again? ‘ This quote becomes all the more poignant when one discovers that only a month after *The Bell Jar*, her first novel, was published, Sylvia Plath took her own life (Schimlpfening) This parallel of the writer’s life and her main character in her only novel is not a coincidence.

Plath wrote what she knew and because of her own life experiences she has a great insight as to how people feel. Plath did not only understand madness but she also understood how young adolescent woman feel. *The Bell Jar* shows Plath’s deep interest in growing up, “... in which the old self dies and <https://assignbuster.com/a-trapped-life-the-autobiographical-elements-of-sylvia-plaths-the-bell-jar/>

the new self is born, or the false dies and the truth is born, or the child dies and the adult is born, or the base animal dies and the spiritual self is born.

” Plath had a deep interest in growing because she felt she had to and if there was no such thing than she would fail in life. She believed she had to escape her past and show others her future (Hughes “ On Sylvia” 6). Her tragic childhood was filled with many events that every one must face. When asked about *The Bell Jar* Hughes stated, “ It dramatizes the decisive event of her adult life, which was her attempted suicide and accidental survival, and reveals how this attempt to annihilate herself had grown from the decisive event in her childhood, which was the death of her father when she was eight. ” He father appears in many of her works but is not mentioned in her only novel. Plath felt a deep resentment for her father and felt that if he did not die her life would be completely different: What seemed imperative was some insight into Otto Plath [Sylvia’s father], the father figure who looms like a huge deity-albeit a hateful and/or impotent one-over the bleak landscape of Plath’s art.

.. the daughter, for her part, had gone out of her way at an early age to impress and please him, earning his praise” (Butscher “ Woman and Work” 7) Her problem with men may have stemmed from the torn relationship between Plath and her father. Plath understood how adolescents felt and the obstacles they faced.

Schimelpfening stated: She [Plath] struggles within herself to reconcile her desires to become a writer in a world where woman are expected to be perfect housewives and mothers as well as her desires for sexual equality in

a world where women are expected to be pure and virginal, but men are free to experiment with sexuality without fear of pregnancies or ruined reputations (Schimelpfening) During the time that Plath was raised when there was a great deal of societal pressures upon woman and this gave her a great insight as to how the young woman in her book might act and react to people of the opposite sex and when confronted about sex. In *The Bell Jar* Esther confronted sex in the same manner as Plath. In *Two views of Plath's Life and Career* Wagner stated, " She [Plath] was angry about double standard behavior, and claimed herself the right as much sexual experience as men had. " Sex was not the only pressure she felt as a young adolescent woman but becoming a successful writer became a great pressure at an early age.

" Always a writer, she was awarded a spot as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* magazine during her junior year at Smith. Others undoubtedly saw this as only one more award and honor for Plath, who had been, on the surface, a model daughter, popular in school, earning straight A's, and winning the best prizes" (Foo). Plath felt as though this was not truly her real self but a fake self that she had to emerge from. " ' You walked in, laughing, tears welling confused, mingling in your throat. How can you be so many woman to so many people, oh you strange girl? ' Plath asked herself in the summer of 1952 when she was about to enter her junior year at Smith" (Moses). Plath understood the confusion that adolescents feel because she too was confused.

Plath's mother also put a great pressure upon her when she was a child, as do many other young women's mothers. On the subject of Mrs. Plath, <https://assignbuster.com/a-trapped-life-the-autobiographical-elements-of-sylvia-plaths-the-bell-jar/>

Butscher stated, “ Hungrily, vicariously, she lived through her daughter, sucking up her life to fill the empty sack of her own dull existence... [this] evolved (through high school and college) into a dangerous analytic tie as Sylvia’s world demanded greater perfection.

“ In her novel Sylvia Plath, because of her own life experiences, has a great insight as to how people feel such as the struggles of adolescents. Plath has a great talent with understanding how Esther her main character in her novel *The Bell Jar* might feel at each turning point in the character’s life. However, “ Her subject-the nervous breakdown and attempted suicide of a well-behaved, bright and successful college girl during the summer vacation of 1953-is hardly topical, and for careful, plain, dolorous prose style, which conveys the world of the heroine under the bell jar of madness with its ‘ stifling distortions,’ offers few sentimental attractions” (Locke 67). West stated, “ Her dense specificity makes her people more present than their emotions.

However, Bonds believed “ they have failed to recognize what the novel has to teach about the destructive effects-at least for woman-of our cultural commitment to that model [of people]” (Bonds 49). Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* is very autobiographically and many of its chapters actually came from her journals. Her husband stated, “ A lot of what’s in them [her journals] is practice, shaping up for some possible novel, little chapter’s for novels. She was constantly sketching something that happened to her and working it into something she thought might fit into a novel. She had great insight as to how her characters might feel because of her own life experiences. Butscher stated, “ When the poet is Sylvia Plath, a ‘ confessional’ poet who was <https://assignbuster.com/a-trapped-life-the-autobiographical-elements-of-sylvia-plaths-the-bell-jar/>

consciously dedicated to fusing biography with poetry to create an enduring legend, this relationship can no longer be either split asunder or seriously challenged.

“ “ She infused those objects with a sense of her own life and emotion” (Wagner “ Critical Essays” 4). Plath’s life made her a great novelist and helped her have insight as to how people feel.