

The bell jar and one
flew over the
cuckoo's nest



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It is clearly discernible from both novels that there exist numerous contextual similarities and differences within them. Both authors convey profound messages through the presentation of mental illness and its many aspects. The authors have achieved this by using their real-life experiences as a foundation for the examples and situations they convey; the realism is thus striking. In 1959 at the Menlo Park veterans hospital, Ken Kesey volunteered to experiment the effects of psychoactive drugs, and this has been seen as an inspiration for Kesey to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Also, it has been assumed that *The Bell Jar* is a depiction of Sylvia Plath's cyclical depression. The semantics of the title given to each novel is of great significance in relation to the theme of mental illness. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is clearly an allegorical title in its intent. The 'cuckoo's nest' is the hospital, and the individual who 'flew over' it is McMurphy. The full nursery rhyme is in fact quoted by the Chief as he recollects over his childhood upon awakening from a shock treatment.

It was part of a childhood game played with him by his Indian grandmother: 'Ting. Tingle, tingle, tremble toes, she's a good fisherman, catches hens, puts 'emm inna pens... wire blier, limber lock, three geese inna flock... one flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo's nest... O-U-T spells out... goose swoops down and plucks you out.' It is plausible to suggest and one may discern that the goose who flies over the cuckoo's nest is McMurphy, the 'chief bullgoose looney'; the one he 'plucks out' is the Chief, who escapes at the end of the novel.

Tingle, tingle, tremble toes' is evidently the Big Nurse, who catches the inmates like hens and encourages them to peck one another to death in the 'pen' of the ward, where they are all locked in. That she is 'a good fisherman', a 'fisher of men,' recalls McMurphy's fishing expedition. On the other hand, the title of *The Bell Jar* is simplistic in comparison to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, nevertheless it does encompass some striking allegorical connotations. A bell jar is a bell-shaped glass cover used to protect and display delicate or fragile objects.

Its other purposes are that it is used as a scientific apparatus, establish a vacuum or controlled atmosphere and to contain gases. It is plausible to suggest that Esther Greenwood is trapped inside this bell jar and that her sexual, physical and emotional confinements are ambiguous to those outside of the bell jar. For example, at the inception of the novel, Esther presents her contradictory opinion of Doreen; 'I guess one of my troubles was Doreen.... Doreen singled me out right away.

She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. This delineates that Esther is unable to express herself; moreover, Plath's use of this oxymoron shows how Esther is on her path to being sexually, physically and emotionally bruised by the predicaments that she encounters. This is forecasted in the opening pages of the novel where Esther contemplates about what she was hypothetically required to do; 'I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls...' This distinct abandonment of conventional practices by Esther was looking to ignite a clash in her mind.

This conflict affects every sphere of Esther's life and eventually results in her personal digression and subsequent suicide. Furthermore, the bell jar symbolises the prospects of mental illness, and when she is gripped by these prospects, Esther feels as if she is inside an airless jar that distorts her perspective on the world and prevents her from connecting with the people around her. Plath constructs this provocative opinion in the novel where she enables Esther to conclude that; ' I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.

Plath's use of the sibilant words ' stewing' and ' sour' evoke strong sensual reactions in the reader. Moreover, the use of the possessive pronoun ' my' preceded by the adjective ' own', indicates that Esther has been cut off from socialising and her status in the social world has become abnormally lonesome. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* explores the aspects of mental illness by setting the novel in a mental asylum. The structure Kesey uses, directs criticism at American institutions themselves and was reflected in the populations growing rebellion against being told what to think.

In the development of the opening pages in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the patients take part in group therapy, which involves all the patients sitting collectively, and conferring any problems that they would like to share, or recapitulating any progress that they may have made. The reader sees Nurse Ratched claiming that this has therapeutic value; however, it is clear from the outset that it is a means of control for the nurse, as she advances on her opportunity to humiliate patients in the presence of one another.

For example, in the progress to the first group meeting we witness that the nurse is able to coerce each patient in revealing a secret about himself in front of the entire group, whom he can no longer face because of the shame of his revelation. " I tried to take my sister to bed. ' Her eyes clicked to the next man; each one jumped like a shooting-gallery target. ' I - one time - wanted to take my brother to bed'... ' I lied about trying, I did take my sister! ' ' So did I! So did I! ' ' And me! And me! ' "

The reader sees the patients successively admit to the disgraceful acts they had committed, each trying to outdo the other, in an attempt to satisfy the nurse. Through this example, Kesey suggests Nurse Ratched's control over the patients in almost every aspect of their life. Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath also delineates the various aspects of mental illness, in the form of a collective group. The opening pages of the novel immediately reveal to us the typical 1950s American society that the women lived in.

This revelation has occurred through the intrinsic and life-like descriptions that Plath has depicted. Furthermore, it also introduces us to Esther's contemporaries; a group of women of the same age. Through Plath's description of New York, we are given an insightful reflection of the society at that time. '... they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class... waiting to get married to some career man or other.

These girls looked awfully bored to me. ' Women were trapped in a patriarchal society, with rigid expectations of themselves. The cost of going against social norms was isolation, breakdown and the destruction of the

self, which was precisely Esther's path to being different. Plath has significantly formed this basic structure, in order to set an immediate precedent and give the reader a way of exploring mental illness. The two novels give insight into various interpretations of mental illness.

The general definition of 'mental illness' according to the American Heritage Stedman's Dictionary, is; 'a) Abnormal behaviour b) the inability to function socially c) the inability to function safely d) emotional distress.' Each one of these aspects of mental illness is perceptible in both novels. Nevertheless, there is ambiguity in the interpretation of mental illness within the novels and who actually is mentally ill. For example Chief Bromden, the first person narrator of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is a person prone to hallucinations and delusions.

As a result, the reader is sometimes left in ambiguity as to whether some of the events he describes really happened or not. Chief believes he sees small mechanical items inside the capsules of medicine he receives and believes that a machine is responsible for creating the 'fog' that taints his perceptions. Chief's effectiveness as a narrator also contributes to the development of the story; however, since told through his eyes, the story unfolds in part through the Chief's altering emotional and intellectual state.

After McMurphy leads the revolt over the World Series, for example, the Chief notes that 'there's no more fog any place,' implying that McMurphy is actually helping to bring sanity to the ward. This information can be seen being transmitted by Kesey, near the very beginning of the novel, thus enabling readers to observe a highly important structural feature. On the

other hand, the opening pages of *The Bell Jar* describe Esther Greenwood's sad misplacement and removal from reality. She lacks the optimism and humour that society expects of her, and that she expects of herself.

Furthermore, she acknowledges the fact that most girls that are of her age desire to do what she is doing, and she is unable to comprehend her own absence of enthusiasm; ' I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. ' In the opening pages of the novel, Esther seems to be preoccupied with the phenomenon of death. This negative attitude is complemented by an antagonistic tone when she says that she is ' stupid' and feels ' sick'.

Plath has carefully illustrated a picture of Esther's summer being repulsive, perplexed and death-oriented. Her attitudes and life experiences also appear to be this way. Ken Kesey has intensified the meaning of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, by using an evocative and thought-provoking opening line; the novel begins with the following words: ' They're out there. ' The explanations of these words are found in the following sentence of the novel which begins on a new line.

The use of this cataphoric reference to begin the novel indicates the importance of an unknown society and the narrator's contemporaries. Kesey has carefully structured this by the use of two demonstrative words: ' They're' and ' There'. Both words are employed vaguely since they do not specify any detail, thus raising the importance of something unknown. Moreover, the use of such an ambiguous opening sentence instantaneously

opens the gates of questioning for the reader. On the contrary however, Sylvia Plath uses a different approach in beginning *The Bell Jar*.

Her focus is more contextual and personal about the narrator. The novel begins with the following sentence: ' It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. ' Sylvia Plath also presents the idea of Esther being misplaced in this first sentence of the novel. The fact that Esther does not know what she is doing in New York implies that she does not know what she wants to do with her life and why she is even there.

The use of the words ' queer' and ' sultry' is significantly eccentric since it portrays a conflicting image, which is achieved through the profound application of language at the inception of the novel. The traditional meaning of queer is ' strange' or ' unusual'. However, it is most often used in reference to gay men. Sex will form an important part of Esther's preoccupations in the novel. This is clearly evident from the opening pages of this novel where Esther Greenwood's revulsion for her life seems in part a response to her finding her dream summer lacking when she is left with an old short man on the night out with Doreen.

Moreover she had to depressingly witness Doreen carry out her sexual encounter with Lenny. Sylvia Plath's exophoric reference to the Rosenberg's trial at the beginning of the novel indicates the foul effects such political events will have on Esther's mind. Esther Greenwood bears witness to this in the opening pages of the novel: ' I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. ' She later

acknowledges her abnormal condition: ' I knew something was wrong with me that summer'.

This disarray of thoughts indicates her mental anarchy, and being conveyed early in the novel, designates the importance of chronological structure, since this knowledge is a foundation for building on the other developments of mental illness that are expressed at a later stage in the novel. The authors' have elected the protagonist of each novel to mirror their own gender. Moreover, the revolt that occurs in the minds of each protagonist and character is caused by the opposite gender.

For example, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy challenges to ' beat' nurse Ratched ' at her own game'. He intends to '... have her where she don't know whether to shit or go blind... ' This is a challenge to the nurse's oppressiveness, which instils fear and anarchy in the mind of the other characters. Moreover, Mr Harding, at the inception of the novel, informs the nurse and other patients about the fact that his wife preys on his insecurities about his sexuality.

This could be due to Mrs Harding's intentions of asserting herself as the dominant figure in their relationship. Similarly, in *The Bell Jar* one of Esther's main tasks was to seek out men to sleep with, after realising that her boyfriend Buddy Willard slept with a waitress because she was ' free, white, and twenty-one,' Esther felt that her virginity was a barrier in recovering from her plaguing lethargy: ' Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard, my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck.

This evidently displays Esther's views on her virginity and her desire to banish this label as soon as she heard Buddy was no longer one, she felt it would be unjust to remain a virgin. Esther's only goal was to lose her virginity so that she would be equal to Buddy. Her virginity 'weighed like a millstone' around her neck because it made her feel inadequate in front of Buddy. The connotation of the word 'millstone' perhaps refers to the role of a woman; to serve. Holding such a heavy object is a burden.

Therefore, Plath has used this word to convey the extent of the burden that is Esther's virginity. Thus the prospects of mental illness have continuously been used as a platform to deal with the masculine and feminine contention. An exploration into the aspects of mental illness by the employment of form requires an indispensable comparison of the literary technique observed by each narration. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* Kesey implements the first-person narrative of a peripheral character, thus we are acquainted with Chief Bromden's perception of the narrative.

The Chief deceives patients and ward staff into believing he is a deaf mute, whereas we later find out that the Chief does have the ability to hear and speak. This deception has arisen from the Chief's paranoia and serves as a means of protection for him from the supposedly hostile external forces of society to which he refers as the 'Combine'. The Chief views the world as one mechanical system that is out to 'get' any individuals who fail to conform to society's rules.

His psychology may have arisen from his experiences as a child on the plain where he lived as a Native American. People from the government went to

visit the plain to speak to the Chief's father to negotiate the repossession of the land on which the tribe lived to build a hydroelectric dam. The Chief recalls how angry he became when the people ignored what he said; ' makes me madder the more I think about it. ' This experience could account for the development of the Chief's hatred towards the government, and consequently the whole ' Combine'.

However, through this experience the Chief learns that he is not the subject of attention, even when he tries to acquire it. ' And I'm just about to go on and tell them, how, if they'll come on in, I'll go get Papa off the scaffolds of the falls, when I see that they don't look like they heard me talk at all. ' From this realisation, the Chief's deaf and dumb act is born, in order to withdraw attention from within him. A side effect of his conduct however, is that it allows him access to all conversations and events to which other patients on the ward are not privy.

Hence, Kesey ensures that this aspect of mental illness is explored through the use of form, which consists of the first-person narrative of a character on the sidelines. Conversely however, in *The Bell Jar* Plath uses a first-person narrative of the protagonist; Esther. Esther's accuracy in perceiving reality is ambiguous; there is a contrast between what Esther's inner voice is thinking and what she is saying. For example when she talks to Doctor Gordon, her voice reflects on her experience, however her inner thoughts are completely different; ' What did I think was wrong?

That made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong. ' This enables the reader to deduce that Esther has in fact a disarray

of mental thoughts, which do develop into suicidal actions. Plath's implementation of this noted literary method to communicate the narrative, does invite the readers to offer various interpretations of the text, and acquire the events that take place through the lenses of the protagonist.

In summation therefore, one can discern the noted similarities and differences, in the approaches of both authors to demarcate ideas of mental illness, through the employment and fusion of various literary techniques. The two novels are exquisite in the authors' portrayal of mental illness. The authors' use of form, structure and language help build an intrinsic recurrence of common themes, which give way for supporting each message.