

# The bell jar: an autobiographical novel

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## **Deterioration: The Reversed Bildungsroman**

The Bell Jar is a subtle replica of Sylvia Plath's own life where she manipulates the elements of an autobiography to essentially recreate her own events leading up to her own suicide. Plath views the world from a feminist standpoint in the novel, where women are subject to degradation and are not given the freedom to express or find themselves. When women during the 1950s counteracted what they were told to do, it eventually led to punishment and shunning. This idea is most commonly reflected in anti-transcendentalism – the idea that nonconformity is a curable illness.

However, Plath speaks out to women in The Bell Jar by depicting through the depression and breakdown of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood that trying to exceed society's expectations as a female in a postwar society will lead to an unsuccessful outcome and the inability to heal. Plath utilizes Esther's figurative bell jar as a method to show the antisocial angsts that a female suffers as a result of overwhelming anticipations that she is expected to fulfill in her life.

Esther Greenwood sees herself as an ordinary girl who thinks that she has trouble finding her own identity, but she later realizes that her sickness is more chronic than it seems. The beginning of the novel mentions execution of the Rosenbergs, which makes her feel disgusted (Plath 1). This foreshadows what Esther later experiences, which is electric shock from Dr. Gordon because she could not sleep, read, or write. She recounts her experience as feeling terrible and degraded especially because a male doctor treated her in such a brutal manner (Plath 143-144). Esther feels that

she is being blamed for having a mental sickness that she cannot heal from. She sees Dr. Gordon as a male villain whom she cannot escape from because he suggests for her to come back again for more shock treatments, but she refuses. Esther gets extremely shocked when she gets a female psychiatrist in a private hospital outside of the city (Plath 186). This detail suggests that it was very uncommon for women in the 1950s to have medical jobs because it is a male-based time period where men are given the most recognition and accolades.

To continue with Esther's feeling of subservience, she gets invited to a banquet, hosted by a magazine, Ladies' Day. When she comes home, she gets sick and throws up everywhere. Leuschner recalls that when her friend Doreen comes to take care of her, she tells Esther that the magazine sent a "get-well" card because of the poisoning of some of the food at the banquet. Esther feels that it does not compensate for the mental and physical damage she felt because the magazine people did not concern themselves over matters that seemed trivial to them. Leuschner attempts to show the readers that illness is something insignificant and ignored, especially as a female, and this is what causes Esther to feel a sense of degradation and inequality because she has no say in what she wants and is expected to go by society's rules. Esther receiving shock treatments and given mere attention while being sick displays the male-dominant society that Esther is forced to live in and that women in her time setting (1950s) were not given any room to voice their opinions because they were subject to immoral resolutions.

Plath uses her book's title "The Bell Jar" as a figurative symbol in the novel which Esther feels she is underneath constantly because of her inability to meet standard societal expectations. Literally, a bell jar is a bell-shaped glass used to hold fragile items. This symbol is seen throughout the novel when Esther feels weak compared to other women following norms. The bell jar refers to the "shell" that Esther hides under because she is internally conflicted about her own identity when she says she wants to become a poet (Kuhl). The bell jar is her little bubble that prevents her from relating to other people, therefore lacking the ability to perceive the world in a profound manner. Her mother as well as other figures, like Jay Cee have higher expectations for Esther and expect her to become more ambitious about her life to do bigger and better things. One example that Esther witnesses near her home is the life of one of her neighbors, Dodo Conway. Dodo Conway is a Catholic married woman in the novel who had six children. Esther despised children and the thought of getting married, because she feels like she would be getting false hopes of her married life and would not have true happiness (Plath 83, 116-117). Esther is portrayed as a nonconformist in the novel who tries to rebel against being on the lower spectrum of the social class or the idea of being an ideal woman in reaction to Dodo Conway's "so-called perfect life".

To further implicate Esther's views on oppression of women in her society, she starts to become more and more depressed because she feels she is not fulfilling her expectations as a young woman. Later in the novel, she contemplates many methods of suicide, including drowning, cutting, hanging herself, and overdosing on sleeping pills (Plath 147, 169). When she resorts

to overdosing, she is unsuccessful because she is later revived by the hospital. This mental breakdown of Esther's mind leads to her own success that she strives for beyond what women are meant to do in the 1950s. Esther giving up in her dream shows that she is extremely passionate about her ambitions and being intellectual (Kuhl).

One of the characters that seem to foil with Esther is the woman in charge of Ladies' Day Magazine, Jay Cee. Budick notes that Jay Cee shows some masculine characteristics in herself, such as being stern, strict, and straightforward. Jay Cee is an example of someone who is submissive to society because she exemplifies what women should be rather than finding her own talents and nature. Budick also mentions that Esther sees Jay Cee as sort of a mother figure and she wishes Jay was her mother because she would want to learn from her on how to become a perfect woman and make a difference to society. On one hand, Esther attempts to alleviate the pressure of people around her that are trying to instill these "qualifications" that she is trying to adapt to, but on the other hand, she attempts to find her true and fitting identity (Bloom).

The long-term aftermath that Esther suffers after her suicide attempt is going to multiple psychiatric hospitals and being forced into isolation, which leads into a deeper catastrophe. When Esther reaches the psychiatric ward, she is put with another Italian woman who giggles at everything; she is described as having a mental disorder and having abnormal social skills (Plath 176). The male doctors continuously kept on coming and introducing themselves with fake names, such as Dr. Pancreas and they did not really

help Esther heal at all because they could not understand why a woman who had so much going for her would decide to take her own life. During her stay, she is treated like an insane person, even though she exhibits characteristics of a normal human being. For example, when Esther is given a place to eat with all the other patients, one of the nurses micromanages her actions, and another Negro man who works there mocks Esther; this causes her to feel that her intelligence is being insulted (Plath 180-181).

In addition to Esther's poor treatment at the psychiatric ward, she is also ignored by many of the nurses. When a nurse come in to take her temperature, Esther accidentally knocks down the box of thermometers that were put on her bed, and the nurse gets angry, claiming that Esther does it deliberately. She is taken to another room to be locked up instead of given a warning or a better resolution (Plath 182-183). Esther is constantly transferred from hospital to hospital, and this worsens her condition because her life becomes more mundane than it was before. Furthermore, every hospital that she goes to, she is always locked up further and further away because the doctors misdiagnose Esther's condition rather than help and communicate with her (Leuschner). Esther does not fully get better from this, and later when she goes to Belsize, the best hospital for treatment, for electroshock therapy, she is partially healed, but now she has to figure out how to distinguish between what she sees under the bell jar and what she has the ability to see.

Although *The Bell Jar* mirrors Plath's own deterioration and suicide attempt, it essentially speaks out for women of the 1950s generation because of

customs that women are forbidden to defy. Esther's actions show the consequences of rebelling against society for freedom of choice and the desire for individuality, but she also shows the downfalls of conforming to submissiveness, such as the false ideology of concurrently having a perfect marriage and career and having background knowledge and experience on sex. The novel reveals a double standard from a female's perspective because women are initially toys to the males in terms of sex, and males are not given the same provocative recognition that women receive because they are meant to serve the men. Going against the norms of society is what Plath tries to reiterate as a way to strike back against a male-dominant society, but it can also cause gruesome internal and external destruction.