

The psychoanalytic theory on esther's dissatisfaction with society in the bell ja...

[Literature](#)



Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, is a Roman a Clef written in the first-person perspective of Esther Greenwood, a young woman who is in a downward spiral that ends in an attempted suicide and her challenge to regain sanity. The writing of the text places a significant emphasis on the rapid decline of Esther's mental health, depicting an unequal American society divided by gender and sex. The novel centers on the core theme of Esther's depression and the significant external reasons for her decline. Additionally, the depression and struggle to fit in to society which Sylvia Plath faced as a young woman is symbolic of Esther Greenwood's character and the depression she endures within the novel. The semi-autobiographical novel centers Esther and her struggle trapped inside the metaphorical 'bell jar' of 1950's American societal expectations.

Esther's depression and dissatisfaction with society is the underlying theme of the novel, thus, it is the focus of this textual analysis. By understanding Esther's character and her progression towards suicide after a strenuous fight with depression it allows a greater analysis into her psyche. As Esther's mental states declines throughout the novel, her frustration with society grows stronger which compels a reading which uses Freudian psychoanalytical techniques for textual exploration. Conversely, when a Feminist reading is applied to textual analysis it becomes clear that Esther's tortured psyche is the result of the greater context of inadequate, patriarchal societal structures. Thus, Esther's depression and dissatisfaction with society is a product of the normative expectations of 1950's America. Therefore, my analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* will seek to evaluate whether Psychoanalytical or Feminist theory provides a more convincing explanation

of Esther's dissatisfaction with society. As Esther's character develops throughout the novel, her desire to fit in to the American 'good girl' image reflects her dissatisfaction with society, which can be attributed to her childhood, and the unsatisfactory attention received from her parents. Thus, the text lends itself to psychoanalytical interpretation as Freudian principles explore "the content of the unconscious is essentially those drives that are inadmissible to the conscious self and are therefore forced out consciousness through mechanisms of repression. These include drives and memories related to the 'primal scene' (childhood recollection of seeing her/his parents having sex) as well as taboo desires related to the Oedipus Complex". Therefore, Esther's intrinsic need to fit in can be understood as more than a simple desire to be a successful journalist, but rather, a compulsion to fulfill the psychological needs of security which were not adequately met in childhood. Therefore, to analyze the themes of desire which Esther's psyche possesses, the source of desire must be properly identified.

Consequently, as the desire to fit in and the source of this desire are the two significant factors of Esther's psyche, an effective reading of this novel must begin by addressing these components. An application of Sigmund Freud's Oedipal complex provides a persuasive explain of Esther's failure to develop coping mechanisms which will serve her throughout her life. The Oedipal complex is regarded as a "dysfunctional bond with a parent [that one does not] outgrow in adulthood and that doesn't allow [them] to develop mature relationships with...peers". Therefore, as Esther's relationship with both her parents was absent and insufficient, she manifests perfectionist goals for

herself. For instance, Esther describes her college life as “nineteen years of running for good marks and grants of one sort of another”. Thus, Esther’s vision for herself leaves no room for failure as she is driven to uphold her perfectionist character. This ambition to maintain a perfectionist vision is derived from the lack of acknowledgement of the severity of Esther’s depression.

Esther’s mother seems unwilling to accept that her Esther is unwell and she may have played a part in Esther’s downward spiral. A key quote, from her Mother as a child; [add quote about mum not giving her praise, as such the Oedipal development holds great significance in terms of her desire to achieve great things to receive recognition from her Mother

When considering Esther’s relationships with men, a psychoanalytical lens best describes how she desires to find partners who were similar to her father. The Oedipal complex manifests as: “She will not necessarily realize that what she really wants in wanting this man is something she never received from my father. The evidence will lie in the similarities between his treatment of her and her father’s treatment of her... Thus she will succeed in gaining the kind of attention she wants from her current ‘crush’”. As such, Esther consciously desires a partner who possesses the same attributes of her father. Consequently, as the analysis compels a Freudian psychoanalysis examination, it is necessary to first examine the Oedipal conflict in Esther’s childhood. This process is triggered when an infant is first threatened by loss of intimacy with a parent, such as Esther’s father, they become aware of outside influences which can replace this loss. Thus, this best describes

Esther's relationship with Constantin within the novel as Esther states find quote about the feeling of when she was with her dad. As Esther found the same attributes in Constantin as she did in her father, she initially reports feeling content. As Esther has been left with an overwhelming lack of intimacy from her father throughout her childhood development she is not specifically looking for Constantin, but she is subconsciously looking for this same comfort in a sexual partner and therefore leaves her dissatisfied and disappointed. Additionally, Esther does not find satisfaction with any male in the book, and therefore she was unable to work through her Oedipal stage due to her Father's death, her misplaced desire is the cause of her dissatisfaction because she cannot get what she wants.

As Esther's downward spiral continues, cues from Esther's mother play an incendiary role. Mrs. Greenwood, harmful to Esther's psyche through her unyielding passivity, is pinpointed as being one of the causes of Esther's attempted suicide. Esther's mother can be grouped with a stream of domesticated women that symbolize Esther's conflict with the surrounding world. As Esther's mother symbolizes the major conflict of Esther's dissatisfaction with society, this ultimately leaves Esther stuck in a chasm - it is because of Esther's mother's inability to accept Esther's fate as part of a biological paradigm. Per, Gotlib and Hammen, " Few people are sympathetic or understanding about prolonged depression, believing it largely to be under personal control". Esther's depression is misunderstood by her mother, who gloats, " I knew my baby wasn't like that...I knew you'd decide to be all right again" after Esther decides to leave Dr. Gordon's hospital. In believing that Esther can simply turnoff her depression but chooses not to,

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Esther's mother implicitly labels her daughter somewhat of a liar and minimizes the severity of the deep depression Esther feels. Undoubtedly, such a dismissive comment is neither supportive nor conducive to Esther's recovery and is as much of a deterrent to Esther's formation of a healthy mentality as are any societal constraints that Mrs. Greenwood may represent. In fact, in the immediacy of Esther's situation, her mother's refusal to accept and understand her is much more of a painful incurrence than the more general oppressive figure of the 1950's house-wife that Mrs. Greenwood's character symbolizes. Due to the lack of a proper support system and a constant underlying battle against her own perfectionism, Esther turns her failures into self-rebuffs.

While the Oedipal Complex explains the origin of Esther's psychological condition, psychoanalysis must be further explored to provide reason for her decline into depression and frustration with society's expectations. Thus, several elements of Freudian analysis regarding the psyche hold great importance into delving deeper into the nature of the desire Esther feels to fit in to society. For example, the unconscious mind is the notion that humans are motivated and driven by desires, fears and needs, of which they are unaware. Within the novel, Esther is driven by the desire to belong and fit into American society. As such, her desires manifest into a need to take on another persona and personality. For instance, she tells Lenny that " her name is Elly Higginbottom". As Esther often uses aliases or pseudonyms in the novel in social situations; it gives her a certain freedom to pretend to be someone else. This feeling of having a " split personality" demonstrates Esther's desire to become another person, so dissimilar from herself that she

loses sense of who she is later in the novel. An application of the unconscious provides a more convincing explanation of Esther's desire to fit into society as it explains how her Oedipal trauma stemmed from lack of parental support which manifests as her lack of identity and desire to be someone she is not. Thus, the theory of the unconscious mind aligns with Esther's misplaced Oedipal desire. As Esther moves through the world, she does not realize how unconscious forces shape her actions and personality, and how this underpins her dissatisfaction with society. As Esther's desire to fit into 1950 American society is dependent on her unconscious thinking, it "is a dynamic entity that engages us at the deepest level of our being". Regulating these unconscious forces are Esther's id, ego, and super ego.

Betsey will be Esther's ego as she represents restraint and a good girl. Betsey allows Esther to control her actions while she has a strange desire to be her. Use quotes from Freud and the book to link the ego to Betsey and how Esther wanting to become someone else causes her dissatisfaction with herself which projects to society.

Comparing the ego to the id use Doreen to investigate how Esther wants her desires to be fulfilled. She doesn't consider what is realistic, doesn't consider the morals behind her actions, gets a feeling of release when the desires are fulfilled. This can be psychosexual energy also use to talk about sex and her desires in the realm of sexual relations.

The super ego is the most socially impacted one therefore links to feminism well. This contributes to the right and wrong. Use Esther's example of leaving Doreen outside in her vomit. While she wants to leave her there she

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knows the right thing to do is help her. This employs moral perfection and therefore Esther wants to be satisfied with herself but in reality can't because society plays such a significant role in her dissatisfaction.

Within *The Bell Jar*, Esther is considered to be acting out of society's normalities which inadvertently takes a toll on her mental health - represented by her downfall into depression and suicide. This can be best explained by a Feminist analysis as patriarchal ideology " suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have," in society. For these reasons, if a female accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules which society place upon her she is considered a " good girl," and thus if she disobeys these rules she's a " bad girl". Conversely, as Esther is influenced by her desires to find a sexual partner and have sexual relations, she rebels against the " good girl" stereotype. This is significant during Esther's add quote from book which shows ester rebelling the right thing to do. Furthermore, as Esther violates patriarchal sexual norms she is a " bad girl." As Esther's character explores both a " good girl" and " bad girl" she does not conform to just one stereotype which evokes her dissatisfaction with society. As such, it aids to her feeling of being an outsider. Thus, her attempted suicide is greatly impacted by these patriarchal sexual norms imposed over women in the 1950's. The pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology is directly responsible for Esther's dissatisfaction with society.

A striking illustration of the novel's insight into patriarchal society is the notion of being ' pure' for a male's satisfaction. Esther is faced with the hypocrisy of sexual purity in *The Bell Jar*, specifically through her experiences

with Buddy Willard. The idea of being, 'pure' is synonymous with 'virgin' within the novel and significantly adds to Esther's dissatisfaction towards society. Therefore, Esther's obsession with the sexual purity of those around her and her anxiety about her own virginity dominates Esther's thoughts on female sexuality impacting her mental health. For instance, Esther reflects, "When I was nineteen...pureness was the great issue...I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't...I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line." Additionally, Esther's admiration of Buddy Willard, for example, the young man she presumably has always imagined herself marrying, comes primarily from his cleanliness and purity. As such, throughout the course of her life, Esther comes to see that the only good in the world is that which is clean or pure. Therefore, when this value of purity which Esther holds so dearly is shattered after finding out how impure Buddy Willard is, makes Esther realize the things she adores and respects are not realistic. Moreover, it becomes the predominate cause for her dissatisfaction with society and is reliant on the general social-ethos of 1950's America

For these reasons, the double standards which are made apparent to Esther through the course of the novel are the main reason for her decline into depression and suicide. As Esther realizes society is not what she expected, her ideals of the perfect world are shifted, thus causing her to feel depressed of what the world has become. As Esther is brought to the reality of patriarchal society within New York, her realization of the hierarchy plays a significant role in her mental state. As Andrea Dworkin states, "Being female in this world means having been robbed of the potential for human choice by

men... One does not make choices in freedom. Instead, one conforms in body type and behavior and values to become an object of male sexual desire". This notion that women are robbed from potential within society is clear as Mrs. Willard's tells Esther, " What a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from". This confessional nature of the novel suggests that the lack of autonomy is on the forefront of Esther's mind. Therefore, as Esther attempts to defy patriarchy it leads to alienation and self-destructive behavior. Her reluctance to conform to beliefs she does not hold thus becomes an inward struggle and contributes to her dissatisfaction with society.

In *The Bell Jar* Esther's mental health problems and dissatisfaction with society are symbolized through the use of a bell jar metaphor. Esther feels as though she is trapped and oppressed by society's expectations and responsibilities placed upon women. This weight she feels not only results in her mental isolation but also her growing mental instability. Esther feels as though she is trapped in her own inner world of alienation, a personal " bell jar". As the bell jar is used to make Esther feel as though she is unlike the rest of society, this is similar to how " It was a queer sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York." As Esther identifies with the Rosenbergs, Esther situates herself outside and in some ways opposed to American society. Therefore, the metaphor of the bell jar acts to reinforce the idea that Esther is considered outside society's normalities and thus damages her identity which in turn causes her decline of her mental state. Unlike a

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manipulating Esther's psyche, the application of Feminist principles to Esther's experiences broadens the context of her psychological depression. While the existence of desire within Esther is the product of internal psychological factors, the specific form and manner in which they were created within reality are entirely the product of the patriarchal society she resides in.

The Feminist reading ultimately proves to be superior in revealing meaning within the novel, whilst Freudian psychoanalysis was able to provide explanation for Esther's psychoanalytical profile, its limited focus prevented such a reading from identifying the influence of the society she lived in. However, a Feminist reading proved superior in terms of analysis, as it further broadened the context of Esther's dissatisfaction with society. This in turn, led to understanding greater meaning being derived from the novel, as given the psychologically damaging interactions Esther encountered, the overall manner which society controls Esther's life should be considered as negative. As Esther is a symbol of the consequences of the patriarchal society she lives in, the source of the complications towards her dissatisfaction are not to be considered as the result of her own psyche. Instead, it is the oppressive hand of a patriarchal society that enforces that women are less to men.

Structures of the society which she operates has a deeper Society influence the fact that Esther thinks that Doreen is slutty on a deeper level, the disat because of the double standards holding her back - skying acts as a symbol because she is controlled by men.