

Social issues identification in sylvia plath's the bell jar



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The only novel written by American writer and poet, Sylvia Plath and published in 1963, *The Bell Jar* is semi-autobiographical, with the names of its people and places changed. Largely, it comes from Plath's personal experiences, and own distaste of psychiatric treatment in the 1960s.

American psychiatrists were becoming more interested in psychoanalysis, the possibilities for research and treatment seemed endless. It was a very exciting time for psychiatrists, 66 per cent of American psychiatrists were in private practice, a hefty gap from the 8 per cent in 1917. Although the profession did not wholly embrace all of Freud's ideas, many found some concerning development and gender roles quite helpful. Which suggest, men and women's roles were as determinate as biological characteristics.

Arguing, mental illness grew from failure to assign oneself to gender norms. This perspective could be quite problematic (and inaccurate). For example, until the late 1960s, homosexuality was pathologized because it deviated from "normal gender development" (Hirshbein). New York psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg focused on the conflicts between what he identified as women's role (childbearing) and their work lives. In his article, *The Dynamics of Schizophrenic Reactions Related to Pregnancy and Childbirth*, which was published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Zilboorg began with a two-page survey of women's susceptibility to mental illness at the time of childbirth: The woman living unconsciously as a male and wanting to be male, submits to social demands to be a woman and gets married. She makes relative peace with herself in that she accepts one child, but this is what she does: The child is born. She usually gives the child to a housekeeper or to a nurse... She doesn't conceive, sometimes, for a year, 2

years, 5 years and 10 years. Then she conceives accidentally and gives birth to a child and breaks into a schizophrenic reaction.

For Zilboorg and others, it was natural that a woman who had been pursuing her own career would develop a major illness in response to the conflict between their career and the biological function (bearing children) she is bound by. For a gifted young woman like Plath, who was accepted into Smith College on scholarship, graduating with the highest honours, winning Mademoiselle's college fiction contest for her short story, Sunday at the Mintons, and etc. etc. etc. , she was split by being foremost, a woman, and a perfectionist. Which led Plath to believe she was unaccomplished and on August 24th, 1953, she made her first suicide attempt.

Dr Tillotson prescribed her first course of electroshock therapy (EST) to shake her out of depression but the psychiatrist did not give Sylvia a drug or a shot to anaesthetise her before exposing her to this gear which left Sylvia so traumatised by these EST electrodes that were attached to her temples that she felt as if she were “ being electrocuted for some unknown crime” (Wilson). Amidst the tense climate of the Cold War as well, after repeated blunders by the US government (failed invasion of Cuba, fiasco of the Vietnam War), Americans were increasingly distrusting of authority and spilt over to other sectors, including medicine.

Public outrage was mostly provoked by the use of electroshock therapy and lobotomy in psychiatric wards which was strengthened when John F. Kennedy made public the story of his sister's failed lobotomy. While The Bell Jar is somewhat in agreement with these sentiments it is not quite so

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disestablishmentarian. In fact, it could be interpreted as a case for electroshock therapy. The *Bell Jar's* twentieth chapter does contain bleak morbidity (the protagonist's long-time friend, Joan, who was seemingly in remission commits suicide out-of-the-blue) but it does not necessarily deter Esther's remission. Esther is not dead, and she finds some comfort in this, " I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am". She goes so far as to describing her leaving the mental hospital as " being born twice". This send-off is congruent with Sylvia Plath's own mental wellness at the time; she was admitted to McLean Hospital, Massachusetts, where she met Dr Ruth Beuscher, with whom she made a lifelong bond and was persuaded to a second course of electroshock therapy which resulted in Plath's long-term remission, documented in several biographies, for example, " Almost immediately after these treatments, Sylvia began to recover. During the Christmas holidays, her depression seemed to disappear" and " Plath recovered fully, and by early February 1954 was able to return to Smith College where she had brilliantly completed her degree, written an honors theses, and led an active social life". Plath had no serious relapse until January 1963, which came after a very energetic and creative period with little sleep. Unfortunately, Dr Beuscher was not available as Plath lived in London and could not succeed in finding a place for her and her 2 small children in a psychiatric department.

On February 11th, 1963, Plath committed suicide. Medicine is ever-evolving, there are certain defective treatments in 1960s psychiatric care and anti-women bias's but without it, the extremities of Plath's depression would not

have been delayed. Maybe, even, if Sylvia Plath had been privy to another series of electroconvulsive therapy, she may have lived.