
Sylvia Plath's Presentation of Feelings and Standards on Women as Described in Her Book, the Bell Jar

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath was written semi-autobiographically to verify and express the validity of emotions and to bring a contemporary view of the expectations of women in the 1970's. The Bell Jar has had such a wide range of meaning from the time it has been published until now because it dealt with multiple taboo topics at the time, in the 1960's and 70's. As it is well known, the author of The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath, struggled significantly with mental illness and the unrealistic standards women were supposed to be molded into. She expressed her thoughts on controversial topics through her writings. Though Plath was extremely praised academically, as was Esther Greenwood, her semi-autobiographical self in The Bell Jar, they both did not aim to fit into the cookie-cutter mold of the unrealistic, female homemaker of that time period. Plath and Esther both shared the characteristic of a glum, analytical mind which benefitted their subject matter but deteriorated their emotional limit. Plath had a great awareness of her disorders, while still having the outstanding capabilities to far exceed academic prowess. In The Bell Jar, there is much content to discuss the meanings, restrictions and expectations of women with mental disorders, shock therapy treatment, women in the spotlight, women in academia, and self perception. The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is pertinent as a piece of literature because it revolutionizes the behaviors and perceptions for the people in the 1970's and continues to be used as a confirmation of these behaviors and perceptions, currently.

Some people may not agree and could argue that The Bell Jar was just spewing of a bourgeois and privileged woman with a need for attention and that it has no meaning to the time period. However, that is false. Plath did not enjoy unwarranted attention and found solace in loneliness, which largely influenced her writing. A professor of women in literature, Mrs. Millsap-Spears states, "Sylvia Plath and The Bell Jar, seem to go in out of style". This is a loose statement because it does not have an ultimate source of evidence to support the sales from and since the date of publishing. Though Plath had an indulgent life lead by her prowess as a writer, intimidating scholarly success and attractive wife of famous, handsome poet, Edward Hughes, she was constantly dissatisfied with herself or a moment in her life, her writings more than prove that. Plath strived to elaborate and instil her meanings among her writings. The Bell Jar illustrated her life vividly through her use of characters inspired by her acquaintances, however bleak and unsaturated with hope it may have been. Both Plath and Esther had an extensive psychological history and struggled with depression at a young age. Thus, the subject of her writing was often herself as a method of release. Esther, the main character from The Bell Jar, is a semi-autobiographical version of Plath. All of the works by Plath, especially The Bell Jar,

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display her vulnerability as relatability for anyone who can connect with the expression of her writings. *The Bell Jar* is meaningful because it lent the opportunity to others to understand her point of view or to relate to it.

In *The Bell Jar*, the expectations of women are very easy to pin-point and assess. Esther distinguishes phases of initial romance and the aftermath of marriage as it appeared to be in the 1960's. The main objective for women in this time period would be to marry, have children, and take care of the home. According to Tevaana, an online collaborative civic group, the oppression of the women in the 1960's and 70's was extremely harsh. Specifically, wives would be subject to their husbands bidding (Tevaana). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther states "And I knew in spite of all those roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (Plath 85). Esther also alludes to being processed twice over and stamped for approval of marriage, like a manufacturer would (Plath 244). These are few of the many examples in *The Bell Jar* that present how the ideal woman would appear to be, a homemaker hidden behind her husband. Plath did not just write these thoughts for the defense of women struggling, she too lived in the shadow of her husband. That first-hand experience made writing about the struggle for independence from men more fiery and motivated. *The Bell Jar* verifies this extremely ill concept of submission to males and the expectations of females. At the time *The Bell Jar* was published, it was very outlandish to lead to the assumption, even in semi-fiction, that the expectations of women were plainly absurd and more so unfair. *The Bell Jar* is meaningful in this way because Plath is clearly communicating that this standard is ridiculous, eloquently doing so. Plath brought to light this relatable topic of concern with her writing and even women in the 21st century can relate to this.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther often considers men as disappointments or dishonest. The limitations and expectations of women at the time led men to become more dominant and controlling of women. Many men exuded a conceited demeanor and made women appear to be their lessers. Diane Bonds, an assistant dean at Emory University of Atlanta, states, "The novel presents the transformation of Esther Greenwood from a young woman who hates the idea of serving men in any way to one who appears to earn her exit from the asylum by committing herself..." (Bonds 2). Esther has many points to make of men of this time, mostly of fault. She narrates her thought, "There I went again, building up a glamorous picture of a man who would love me passionately the minute he met me and all out of a few prosy nothings" (Plath 52). She goes on to say that if you expect nothing, you will never be disappointed. Also, that the closer she got to men, she saw their faults so largely that they simply did not mesh with her. Plath and Esther are doubles, the real person and the reflections of her thoughts as Esther. Esther is independent and never wants to be wedded to a man, the "infinite security" of this type of relationship does not appeal to her because she does not want to be stuck standing in the doorway of opportunity without

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the ability to move forward through it. In this manner, *The Bell Jar* instills the idea that it is perfectly alright to not follow the ideals of society as a whole. To be an independent woman, unmarried, and going towards an exciting future is what is important for women to understand.

The Bell Jar largely deals with the topic of self-loathing and self harm. Esther is Plath's exact reiteration of her experiences with self harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts. An extensive portion of the book takes place while Esther is hospitalized for a particular suicide attempt. At the time electric shock therapy was a new method for treating depressed and self-harming patients. Though *The Bell Jar* is semi-fictional, Esther's account of her self harm and treatment, is the exact experience Plath had endured in her life. A particular suicide attempt recalled in *The Bell Jar*, Esther takes us through the long, plotted task of burying herself in a cellar, hiding herself in a small corner surrounded by a shield of wooden logs and taking an excessive amount of sleeping pills, accidentally too many (Plath 167-169). Esther was found several days later and then admitted to a psychological ward where she received shock therapy for what seems to be a second or third time, as it is described. In 1975, Raymond G. Romanczyk and Elizabeth R. Goren with the American Psychological Association conducted a study of a patient with multiple self harm issues, being treated for 10 months with electric shock therapy and other treatments of a different nature (Romanczyk 1). While this type of treatment proved only "moderately successful" most other studies resulted the same way (1). The method of electric shock therapy was and still is terrifying. Controlling self-harm impulses by inflicting pain upon a person in order to somehow coagulate their brain into a different realm of thought was just contradicting. Esther has experienced this type of treatment more than once and yet her depression grew. If Esther is the true rendition of Plath, difficulty with depression did not only grow, but became more serious than before. Plath's meaning in sharing this experience is to provide, not a sense of pity from the reader, but to honestly display how corrupt and unnecessary this method of treatment was because of its lack of effect.

The beginning of *The Bell Jar* starts with Esther at a gloriously lavish celebration of women in contest of writing for a particular magazine in New York. Right at the start we can grasp an idea of Esther's abilities for success. In the beginning chapters, Esther makes a friend just from her exuding her intelligence naturally. This acquaintance, Doreen, made her feel "Sharper than the other girls" (Plath 5). Esther, being Plath's double, shares all of her characteristics of intelligence and precise writing. Esther appreciates superficial things like clothing, expensive meals, and makeup, but she was not overwhelmed by them. Esther's intelligence was high and her mind was very experimental and different from other women, or people in general. Her college dean made exceptions for her studies, this was because her writing was so intriguing. Linda Wagner of Michigan State University says that, "No incident is included which does not influence her maturation" (Wagner 1). This is extremely true. Esther is a self-servicing, efficient woman, who through her accomplishments betters herself academically and scholarly. Esther also does not limit her education to writing. Esther was well rounded and interested in many

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subject, especially math, chemistry, and even foreign languages. The Bell Jar encouraged women to be knowledgeable and successful in studies, that it will help, in time, to prove women equal and in league with men. In this case, knowledge is power.

Self esteem and self perception is also a common topic within The Bell Jar. Esther often is observant of herself, realizing new characteristics or viewing herself in an unflattering way or negatively, very few times positively. She would peel back the layers of people analytically and critically thinking about their smallest gestures. Even when Esther looks at others, she perceives them in a particular way that is tinkered and thought about wholly. In The Bell Jar, Esther states, "I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it" (Plath 77). Esther follows this statement with a memory of a story about a fig tree in which each fig represents a different future, she eventually watches them all drop at her feet because she cannot simply decide what she wants. This story directly deals with her career, personal relationships, and positive outlook slowly drifting to darkness because she is not able to decide on a particular path. The fig tree dies which is relatable to her depression stopping her from fully committing to her desired future. Caroline Smith, a college literature professor infers that from this example in the text from The Bell Jar, that this ultimately means Esther does not believe there is a way to mix both a lavish, celebrated career as a poet and be a happy homemaker (Smith 2-3). Esther's fears directly correlate to Plath because of the semi-autobiographical nature. The meaning of her self doubt is unique and personal. Sharing these emotions in The Bell Jar relays the opportunity to relate and communicates that all options are available. However, when time keeps moving the options will run out, one by one. In life, you must know what you want in order to receive or take what you want.

Sylvia Plath's, The Bell Jar has most certainly endured the test of time and is still considered classic literature today. The Bell Jar is often still used in psychological studies and literary analysis', and referenced often. As in this paper, the sources used have a range of years, however it proves that Plath's writing is still discussed and analyzed today because it is important. Sylvia Plath's, The Bell Jar deals with multiple issues that are still present today, making its importance truly timeless. The Bell Jar deals with female roles, perception, mental health, and relevance. The semi-autobiographical novel also communicates that unrealistic standards do exist, but you do not have to abide by them. Mental health can be a hindrance and a productive source of creativity but can ultimately lead to a crossroads of whether or not to persist in an area of study. The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is pertinent as a piece of literature because it revolutionizes the behaviors and perceptions for the people in the 1970's and continue to do so now.

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