



## A Journey From Madness To Womanhood: An Analysis Of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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### ABSTRACT:

In the 1950s, American culture largely disregarded the distinctive personalities of women. Even during the height of postwar capitalism, people were still permitted to work and make money. However, moving up the social scale was not considered suitable for women. They were expected to adhere to rigid social conventions even prior to marriage. Many people think that the institution of marriage is the most powerful foundation of patriarchal ideology. Sylvia Plath's 1964 novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was first released in 1963, addresses the issue of female exploitation that is fundamental to the institution of marriage. It seems like women are being protected by this organization. Male members of the organization claim that the organization was established to defend women. The goal is to get them into the workforce and out of the house. More specifically, it was meant to reassure males and keep women in their households. The idea is to provide men a tidy, well-maintained, calm, and pleasant home to come home to after a long day at work. According to this viewpoint, males are assigned dominant jobs and women submissive ones. This paper will analyze how mental illness is portrayed in *The Bell Jar* from a feminist standpoint, highlighting the dual perceptions that women have of themselves in public: as mad or as feminine. This paper also argues that, despite some research linking her insanity to her rejection of femininity, her rejection of femininity is an intentional decision that leads to artistic freedom.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, madness, marriage, patriarchy, psychology

### Introduction

*The Bell Jar*, a 1963 autobiographical piece by Sylvia Plath, was one of the notable works by her. Scholars have used this incident to illustrate in great detail the oppression of women in 1950s American culture. Esther Greenwood is the main character of *The Bell Jar*; she is a college student with a passion for poetry. Esther was accepted into a summer internship program and began serving as a guest editor for *Ladies' Day* magazine. Even throughout her internship in New York City, Esther still struggles to find her place in society and satisfaction in it. After fighting for her own autonomous identity as a woman in 1950s society, Esther ultimately gives in to a severe mental illness. In *The Bell Jar*, experts demonstrate how Esther's battles with social injustice and expectations exacerbate her mental health issues. But examining *The Bell Jar* from a disability theory standpoint as opposed to a feminist one will only serve to emphasize how unfairly stigmatized Esther's gender and mental health are. Plath argues that marriage devalues women by using the figure of Esther Greenwood, who is fed up with the restrictive, rigid social norms she must follow. The plan is to restrict their freedom and keep them within the house. The entire scenario has been examined from Esther's perspective in this study. Women's perspectives regarding the institution of marriage are highlighted. Mrs. Willard's observation that "What a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from" (Plath 75) makes it evident that women in the book have subservient gender roles. *The Bell Jar* discusses gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and women's enslavement. Instead of being "the place an arrow shoots off from," Esther aspires to live a free life based just on her gender by "shooting off in all directions" (Plath 75). Having a spouse and a kid doesn't seem sufficient. Men were viewed as proactive and forward-





thinking in mid-20th-century American society, while women were viewed as submissive nurturers and caregivers. Due to the historical association between males and women, any deviation from the usual behavior of a man is deemed to be "mad" behavior. This demonstrates the connection between women's captivity due to their gender and the stereotypically feminine and irrational behavior that society wants women to display. Plath uses the concept "otherness" originally by Michael Foucault to stigmatize and subjugate women who defy patriarchal conventions by painting them as insane. For women, adhering to social norms and handling the fallout can be challenging.

Women's plight and mental health disorders are commonly believed to be related. A culture that either makes Esther angry or thinks she is crazy if she doesn't fit in resists her attempts to integrate in. In the end, the study shows how Esther's struggle with gender standards drives her to take her own life rather than pursue poetry. A feminist reading of the book would be helpful given how much sexism affected Esther's mental health. As women are viewed as the inferior sex in The Bell Jar's patriarchal culture, Esther's mental health issues are a direct result of these constraints. Simone de Beauvoir exposes how patriarchal society oppresses women in her theoretical essay *The Second Sex*. She also emphasizes the era in which women's careers were viewed as "options." In *The Bell Jar*, Esther argues that her issues with social pressure and gender norms are what ultimately led to her mental illness. Moller claims that because Esther defies social norms about gender, she has been "labeled insane" (Moller 29). Sylvia Plath created the character of Esther Greenwood in order to deal with her emotions. Plath also personally witnessed the pain associated with being a woman in a patriarchal culture. She continues, *The Bell Jar* and Plath's personal journals both often address the agonizing sense of having fewer opportunities due to one's gender. Writing and creativity are not attributes associated with women, therefore the patriarchal culture that expects Esther to be feminine stifles her ambition to be both. The underlying reason for her mental health problems is these limitations and expectations. This connects to the article's claim that Esther's rejection of her femininity drove her nuts. Previous studies on the relationship between feminism and insanity in *The Bell Jar* suggest that Esther's mental illness may have its roots in patriarchal society's conception of what it is to be a woman. In contrast to earlier studies, this essay will argue that her insanity is not primarily caused by her rejection of gender. In order for her to write and live her life as she pleases, she also needs other people to believe that she is insane. She can't accept femininity because she wants to use her gender for more than just being nice enough to fit in with a patriarchal society's expectations. Esther decides to accept her insane state in order to pursue her artistic goals.

### The Housewife's Fatigue

In 1961, the French philosopher and writer Michel Foucault authored a book titled *Civilization and Psychosis*, which discussed social subordination and psychosis. Because "it is man who constitutes madness in the attachment he bears for himself and by the illusions he entertains," he said, all men are inherently insane (Foucault 32). Friedan highlights women's psychological needs and the detrimental impact of social restraints on mental health by using the example of a doctor who, in the 1950s, decided to investigate women's weariness, which resulted in an increase in the number of female patients. He found that the cause of his patients' longer sleep durations than average adult sleep patterns was "housewife's fatigue." In the end, he came to the conclusion that boredom was probably the reason some doctors had given their patients tranquilizers. Every morning when you wake up, you feel like there's no use in carrying on with your life in this manner. You take a tranquilizer since the effects leave you utterly apathetic. This is spoken by a suburban woman who clearly needs more in life than housekeeping. Women in the 1950s were worn out and bored by the gender norms that society forced on them. Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of psychoanalysis states that the woman finds it difficult to advance since, according to some, her constitution renders her unfit for a civilized existence. Freud had a patriarchal perspective on society. There have been historical examples of women being subjugated and taken advantage of in a systematic way, keeping these ideals in mind. This point of view highlights how oppressed women are and is connected to Friedan's idea of tired and bored women since it emphasizes how pointless it is for women to have goals other than taking care of the family in a patriarchal society. The idea of "housewife's fatigue" sheds light on the ways patriarchal culture affects the mental health of women. It also suggests that breaking society's standards is equivalent to becoming insane. The popular perception that *The Bell Jar* is filled with





"deranged minds" is reinforced by Esther. Though it indicates that she is ill and it is difficult for a woman to be both feminine and insane in 1950s patriarchal American society, she is unsure of her future plans and thinks that no guy would be interested in marrying a lady who had spent time in a mental facility. Esther's future status as a wife is questioned by Buddy Willard, who states: "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther. Now you've been ... here" (Plath 231). Therefore, lunacy is a metaphor for Foucault's idea of "otherness," which results in exclusion, and femininity is a metaphor for the norms of patriarchal society. According to Esther's interpretation, the bell jar symbolizes insanity: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (Plath 250). She experiences skewed impressions of reality and feels as though she is trapped in a jar when she is mentally ill. Doctor Nolan says that Esther's stay at the asylum will always be associated with her time there because "many would handle me cautiously, or even shun me, like a leper with a warning bell" (Plath 250). Because of the patriarchal ruling, Esther will always be trapped in the bell jar even if she manages to recover from her mental condition. Esther believes that the constraints and tyranny placed on her by patriarchy are the causes of her mental health problems.

Women are called "the second sex" in *The Bell Jar* because of their enslavement to men, which is a hallmark of patriarchal society. "Those who composed and drafted the laws were men who preferred their own sex." Feminist Simone de Beauvoir describes patriarchal societies throughout history. "In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage" (Beauvoir 29) is another statement that supports this. Esther stays at a hotel with other girls who, like her, have won a fashion magazine contest and are qualified to be considered for an internship at a New York magazine. This is where she first learns about the disadvantages of living in a patriarchal society. Women, according to her, lack autonomy and adhere to marriage-related gender stereotypes. Through her analysis of the other girls and their wealthy parents, she concludes that they were "simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (Plath 4) and that they would go to "posh secretarial schools" (Plath 4). While guys marry by taking a wife, de Beauvoir believes that marriage is "the destiny that society traditionally offers women" (Beauvoir 502). "Serious education for women is viewed, consciously or unconsciously, as a danger to patriarchal marriage, home feeling, and finally to male supremacy - economic, social, and psychological," asserts Millett in her feminist work *Sexual Politics* in the context of patriarchal marriages (Millett 128). This comment highlights the submissive gender role that women hold in patriarchal societies and explains why Esther dislikes marriage because of the constraints that come with it.

### Marriage as an Institution

One of the best illustrations of Esther's worries about marriage is Mrs. Willard, who was married to a university professor and had previously taught in a private school: "Cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night." (Plath 89). Mrs. Willard gave up her career to get married, and Esther refuses to live this kind of life for herself. According to de Beauvoir, a woman's "femininity leads her to doubt her professional opportunities" (Beauvoir 754), leaving her little choice but to be married, which is why Mrs. Willard decided to quit from her position. In addition, Buddy fuels Esther's mistrust of marriage by implying that motherhood will dash her hopes of becoming a poet. Because of her misgivings about marriage and her desire for autonomy, Esther declares to Buddy "I'm never going to get married" (Plath 98). He then says, "You're crazy" and "You'll change your mind" (Plath 98). According to de Beauvoir, "a man has far more concrete opportunities to project his freedom in the world; the inevitable result is that masculine realizations outweigh by far those of women: for women, it is practically forbidden to do anything." (Beauvoir 679). This is related to his disdain for a woman's desire because it stands in the way of social norms. Given societal expectations for women, one may claim that Esther's refusal to get married was prohibited since it went against what was expected of women. They are supposed to give up their freedom and reject the thought of looking for work. Esther's refusal to be married leads Buddy to believe that she is insane, which is connected to Foucault's concept of "otherness" (Foucault 16). Because Esther refuses to follow patriarchy's expectations around marriage, Buddy thinks that she has a deranged mind. In the 1950s patriarchal American society depicted in *The Bell Jar*, women are absolutely viewed as *The Second Sex* and are expected to marry. Buddy sees Esther as "mad" because





she refuses to get married and challenges gender norms in society. Esther's goals are in variance with the patriarchal ideals of *The Bell Jar*, which denigrate women and see them as *The Second Sex*. One of the primary causes of Esther's mental illness is the constraints and oppression associated with gender, which crush her dreams of writing poetry.

Women are also expected by society to put off exploring their sexuality until after marriage. These expectations can be linked to the views that patriarchal civilizations hold about female sexuality, as expressed by Millett: "The female bears the lion's share of the guilt associated with sexuality in patriarchal societies" (Millett 54). As a result of shame controlling women's sexuality, a Yale student tells Esther in *The Bell Jar* so "if he loved anybody, he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman, he loved free from all the dirty business." (Plath 84). A patriarchal society limits a woman's sexuality and demands that she retain her purity, according to Millett, "Women are still denied sexual freedom and the biological control over her body through the cult of virginity" (Millett 54). According to Buddy Willard, a man is not like a woman because he has already lost his virginity, while a woman must remain a virgin in order to get married. Near the end of the book, after having her first sexual experience with a professor named Irwin, Esther expresses her dissatisfaction with Buddy and the double standards of society by saying, "My virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck ever since I'd discovered about the depravity of Buddy Willard... After five years of defending it, I am sick of it (Plath 240). In the end, Esther chooses to let go of "the millstone" and rejects the expectations society places on female sexuality.

### Childbirth and its Repercussions

In patriarchal societies, women are also expected to have a significant number of children. As per Ferreter's analysis, "Plath expresses this feminist critique of the medical institutions with which her characters interact," (Ferreter 125). What she condemns most are the patriarchal practices of obstetrics and gynecology, in which males take control of women's bodies in the name of providing for them. A striking example of this is when Esther follows Buddy to see a baby's birth after he enrolls in medical school, drawn by her interest in the "hospital sights." The mother's birthing noises are described by Esther as "inhuman" (Plath 69). Buddy claims that the woman was taking medication that would make her forget that she had felt any pain, and that when the woman moaned and swore, "she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep" (Plath 69). Esther thinks this is ridiculous and says it seems like a prescription drug that a man would make. The woman was groaning in obvious misery; if the medicine hadn't made her forget how terrible the pain had been, she never would have returned home and started a new family. The subject of twilight sleep and birthing draws attention to the important role that males play in the healthcare of women. Given that marriage and women giving up their careers for their children are the cornerstones of femininity, childbirth is an important consideration. Women must submit to patriarchy during childbirth if they want to be seen as feminine and have children. According to Friedan, the pressure to live up to society's standards of femininity can have a severe psychological impact and cause women to make decisions that are harmful to their wellbeing. She gives an example where a woman experienced a nervous breakdown in a New York hospital after learning she could not breastfeed her child. Some medical facilities refused to provide cancer patients a treatment that had been demonstrated in trials to extend their lives because they believed the side effects of the therapy to be unfeminine. Here, women are fearful of being perceived as less feminine. "A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I have a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line," (Plath 233) says Esther to Doctor Nolan, her psychiatrist. Despite feeling threatened by pregnancy, Esther wants the same independence as men. Contrarily, Esther opposes and fights against the injustices as well as the stereotypes of what it means to be a woman in society. Esther defies the norms and accepts the role that society assigns her, in contrast to many other women. She is ultimately viewed as "mad," a label society has placed on her due to her institutionalization, which renders her appear deranged and unfeminine. It is eventually Esther's desire for freedom that leads to this. Esther knows that there are many possibilities and choices in life, and she longs for freedom and independence, thus she feels trapped and undetermined. She believes that she would have to give up on many other choices if she made a decision. Esther rejects society's expectations of femininity because she fears the "mystique," as articulated by Friedan: "The mystique would have women renounce ambition for them. Women are







expected to pursue their aspirations only for their spouses and children after marriage and motherhood" (Friedan 289). Esther has high expectations, and it's almost a shame because being a woman in today's society entails sacrificing one's own goals. "They have avoided the choices that would have given them a personal purpose, a sense of their own being," according to Friedan, "in the name of femininity" (Friedan 253).

When Esther's situation worsens, she meets psychiatrist Doctor Gordon. Her mental health has declined for a number of reasons, including the fact that her mother persuaded her of the benefits of studying shorthand and the fact that her application for a writing course was turned down. This makes her nervous, but Dr. Gordon doesn't seem to mind. He says, "Your mother tells me you are upset" (Plath 135) during their first meeting. He then poses the question, "Suppose you try to tell me what you think is wrong" (Plath 137). He conveys the idea that everything is alright and Esther is simply daydreaming. Doctor Gordon's treatment of Esther, according to De Villiers, is a reflection of patriarchal society's prevailing views, which maintain that her failure to meet social norms for young, "pretty," college females is the true cause of her problems. The encounter does not make Esther feel better because of Doctor Gordon's offensive behavior toward her. After observing that she is not improving, Dr. Gordon decides that she will receive electroshock treatment. She states, "I wondered what a terrible thing it was that I had done" after receiving the first treatment" (Plath 152). This relates to Ferreter's usage of Elaine Showalter as an example and shows that she sees the therapy as a punishment. Recounting hospitalizations of British women in the middle of the 20th century, Ferreter claims that "they transform the experiences of shock, psychosurgery, and chemotherapy into symbolic episodes of punishment for intellectual ambition, domestic defiance, and sexual autonomy" (Ferreter 136). These findings imply that patriarchal culture persecuted women with mental illnesses in the middle of the 20th century as a kind of retaliation for their alleged lack of femininity. After receiving electroshock therapy, Esther's mental state worsens and she makes several unsuccessful attempts at suicide, which eventually force her to check herself into an institution. During Esther's institutionalization, the female psychiatrist Doc Nolan takes on the role of a mother figure for her. Esther writes about Doctor Nolan, "I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I have given her my trust on a platter and told her everything, and she has promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment" (Plath 233). Furthermore, Doctor Nolan hugs her "like a mother" (Plath 223) and affirms Esther's rejection of the traditional belief that women must abstain from sexual relations until marriage. In response, Doctor Nolan calls an article about a married woman lawyer and her Defense of Chastity that Esther tells her about—which her mother gave her—"propaganda" (Plath 234). Moller writes in her piece that she feels "trapped in a world dominated by men" and that she is aware of the supporting role played by Doctor Nolan (Moller 27). Esther is treated disrespectfully by Doctor Gordon, but she feels that Doctor Nolan understands her because of his compassionate and understanding manner. When she needs further electroshock therapy treatments, she counts on Doctor Nolan's help; subsequently, she says, "I felt surprisingly at peace." The Bell Jar was hanging stationary a few feet over my head (Plath 227). Since the medication is now assisting her in managing her mental illness, the idea that it is a punishment has vanished, or the bell jar. Furthermore, in order for Esther to lead a free and independent existence, Doctor Nolan helps her acquire contraception; as she puts it, "I was my own woman" (Plath 235). So, Doctor Nolan is crucial to Esther's mental health rehabilitation in addition to assisting her in processing her sentiments over the gender stereotypes that society has imposed. The patriarchal structures oppress women who choose to be either mad or feminine. Considering that Doctor Gordon represents patriarchal values and shows little respect for Esther by dismissing her concerns, it follows that women's healthcare is governed by patriarchy. Another example of patriarchy's control over healthcare is the way that many women, including Esther, see electroshock therapy as a punishment. Additionally, the results emphasize how the patriarchal still controls the definition of feminine. According to Doctor Gordon, Esther's mental health problems are a result of her refusal to conform to socially mandated gender norms. Even though Esther initially sees her treatment as a punishment, Doctor Nolan's compassion and understanding help her gradually overcome her mental illness, or at the very least, make her feel better.



## Conclusion

Esther's only chance to gain the independence to write poetry demands her to survive in a patriarchal culture while questioning its gender standards. She will continue to experience the oppression of the patriarchal culture after leaving the institution. She chooses the path considered insane by society since she is forced to accept her femininity, which means she must shun poetry. If she had gone the feminine route instead, she wouldn't have been labeled as insane, but she would have felt limited, and that adds to her mental illness. As a result, she would start to think that she is insane. Her choice to be autonomous, liberated, and to reject femininity is symbolized by contraception. She questions herself, "How did I know that the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere?" (Plath 254). She has made the decision to live an insane life, as shown by her aspirations and ideas about the future, which involve traveling and studying.

The limitations and oppression of patriarchy continue to loom large and gloomy around her, even though she is now free of the bell jar. She is worried if things will stay this way. This thesis has examined the patriarchal society shown in *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel. The thesis focused on women's limited options in patriarchal societies in 1950s America: they are either forced to conform to patriarchal definitions of femininity or face stigmatization as crazy, a term used to characterize nonconformist women. This feminist reading examines the character of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*'s thoughts about the patriarchal society as well as mental health concerns. According to this argument, the externalized idea of femininity is what leads to Esther's mental illness, which is in line with earlier studies. The main point of this analysis is how she is made to choose between being a woman and going insane. In contrast to other studies, this thesis comes to the conclusion that the main reason for her mental illness is because she wants to be able to write poetry, but she is prevented from doing so by the limitations placed on her by being a woman.

According to popular belief, marriage and not having a career are the two things that matter most for women and Esther's persona challenges these socially constructed gender stereotypes. Her ambition to become a poet makes it difficult for her to conform to social norms. Furthermore, Esther experiences the restrictions patriarchy places on women in her intimate relationships as well as in society at large because she is surrounded by patriarchal values. Even when she escapes the bell jar at the end of the novel, she still has to fight for the right to write poetry in a patriarchal society. This idea holds that because of Esther's love of poetry writing and rejection of femininity; she is considered insane in the patriarchal society of *The Bell Jar*. The concept that she is insane is supported by the fact that she has been institutionalized and shunned by society due to writing restrictions, which is the primary cause of her mental illness. *The Bell Jar* emphasizes the impact of patriarchal society in Esther's life as well as the pressure she endures from conventional standards surrounding femininity. The only choices available to women are to either be considered insane or to act feminine in order to escape being considered insane. She makes the inevitable choice to go nuts because being a woman restricts her capacity to pursue her job as a writer.

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