

An exploration of the relations between
Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" to the reality of
America in the 1950s.

RQ: To what extent does The Bell Jar relate to the reality of life in 1950s America
for women?

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Introduction

Period works generally help discover the depths of an era and its reality. In this sense, the representation of any given topic, or a global issue, plays a massive part in the case of how it will be viewed across time and space and the place it will hold in history.

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* was first published in January 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, and it was later published after her death under her real name. The work, which is really just an autobiography, is about a young woman's mental breakdown and eventual recovery, as well as what society expected of women in the 1950s. It also includes and resembles real life in America for women at said times, at the beginning of an awakening in the public eye about all the discrimination women face. Plath committed suicide one month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, her only novel.

The 1950s, is known to be the start of the rebirth years of America after the Great Depression. And regarding its culture, the rebirth brought changes in all aspects of life, including gender stereotypes.¹ With this, the "Ideal Woman" image was brought to life. Said concept fits into the book as a whole while the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, walks the reader through a journey of life from the viewpoint of women living under the bell jar of the expectations of society.

In the following investigation, the extent of the resemblance between reality and the novel

¹ Lamb, Vanessa Martins. "The 1950's and the 1960's and the American Woman: The Transition from the 'Housewife' to the Feminist." DUMAS, 2 Apr. 2012, <https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00680821>.

will be explored with the research question: **“To what extent does *The Bell Jar* relate to the reality of life in 1950s America for women?”**

While there have been various claims regarding the work's credibility as a source of history, no investigations or publications have been made with this research question specifically. The investigative approach will follow the pattern of exploring the issue in a general context, followed by its presentation in the book, then the issue itself during that given time's world, and a compare-contrast of both and, therefore, a conclusion on the extent of their relations.

The questioning will mainly be done around the way that the social issues are presented and their extent of relating to reality in the 1950s.

1) Women's Role in Society and Its Effects

Societal norms are generally known to suffocate differences in people's identities. This theme is one of the most critical topics in *The Bell Jar*.

For many decades, those norms' effects on women had become prominent in the eyes of the public, with acts of rebellion and want of change coming from countless women worldwide demanding equality.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* narrates 1950's America's atmosphere and societal norms towards women as stereotypical, with references to the lack of opportunities to earn a living, expectations of childbirth, and the standard of being “pure,” which is aimed to be explored in the following subsections. The harsh roles of domesticity for women were also explored throughout the book. The interactions that Esther, the protagonist, had with the side characters

in multiple settings, such as Buddy Willard (Esther's old boyfriend,) Dodo Convey (a neighbor of hers,) her mother, and Doreen, her friend that she met in New York, demonstrated what life was like for a woman in that atmosphere.

An example can be demonstrated with the quotes from the book when Esther referred to a conversation she had with her previous boyfriend, where he told her that she "would feel differently" after having children, which she interpreted with the words "it was like being brainwashed" This thought flow represents the situation the protagonist is in, not fitting in with the expectations because of not desiring what is viewed as "normal." (Plath, page 81)

This demeanor is debated in historical research as well, "historian Elaine Tyler May called it a kind of 'domestic containment': In seeking to nurture their families in the suburbs of the 1950s, housewives and mothers often gave up their aspirations for fulfillment outside the home."² With this, it is seen that in the fifties, the main service that was expected of women were to give sacrifices for the family life.

Also, in her well-known essay, *Ideal Women*, Jennifer Holt wrote, "The creation of the 'ideal woman' gave a clear picture to women of what they were supposed to emulate as their proper gender role in society."³ Mentioning the similar type of experience that's narrated in the book.

² "Postwar Gender Roles and Women in American Politics." US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Changing-Guard/Identity/>.

³ Home | California State University Stanislaus.

<https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/honors/documents/journals/soundings/Holt.pdf>.

Therefore when the examples and quotes from the book are examined, some similarities can be found between the novel's representation of societal norms to the reality of history.

1.1) Discrimination in the work field

Societal norms referring to women's nature as fragile, fertile, hysterical, and almost as a supporting character in life undoubtedly significantly affected their life opportunities and work field. Therefore its reflections may come forward as stereotypical expectations of jobs for women.

Many sources of historical research (such as *Daily Life in 1950s America* by Nancy Hendricks) talk about the ideal woman image that had been created in the fifties and its effects. At the same time, many bring up the fact that it also contributed to an incredibly restricted area for professional growth during the early fifties and up until the acceptance of the Civil Rights Act in 1964; because of the ways it represented women as a dependent, weak, non-trustable, and indecisive. ⁴

This appears in the book in the aspect of discrimination in the work field as it surfaces as one of the main struggles. Through the protagonist, the issue is presented as a constant, bitter, hopeless yearning for a place in society as a woman who falls out of the norms of the said 'ideal

⁴ "The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Advanced Placement United States History Study Guide." The Fifties | AP US History Study Guide from The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 10 Apr. 2012, <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/fifties/essays/fifties>.

women' that had been created in those years, such as the reference of the jobs of shorthand, waitress or a typist where she said that she "couldn't stand the idea of being either one" (Plath, page 117) insinuating she couldn't see herself living a life that was expected of her.

As someone who is not willing to go through an already defined path of selected careers, marriage, having children, and depending on a man in all areas of life, Esther's struggles are presented with a blunt yet descriptive voice in the usage of thought flows. The part in the book mentioning Buddy Willard's mother's life routine consists of typical examples of the type of life Esther seems to despise, such as "getting up at seven" and "washing up the dirty plates and making the bed" and "spending the evening washing up even more dirty plates till falling into bed, utterly exhausted" where she justifies and puts forward the way of thinking which results in her distaste for said things, with the phrases of "And this seems a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself." (Plath, page 80)

This supports the idea of the general public expectancy being women depending on men for resources while only providing housework, which, at the same time, corresponds to the essay written by Audre Lorde voicing these issues during those times in America, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact only threatens those women who still define the master's house as their only source of

support.”⁵ with the resembling emphasis on the wrongful codependence of women on men in financial and professional matters; it could be said that they are similar to the ones mentioned in the book.

Another example of the issue in hand, maybe the suicide of Anne Sexton, one of the most famous poets of mid-20th century America, ending her life because the lost hope of finding a place in society that she desired and was allowed at the same time. Another happening that can be a very similar example to Anne Sexton’s death is the life and the suicide of the author of the book, Sylvia Plath, who lived mainly during the ’50s, writing: “. . .it’s quite amazing how I’ve gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar.” where she expressed the conflict between the lifestyle of a poet/intellectual and that of a wife and mother becoming a central preoccupation of her with metaphors and symbolisms before her death, and the pressure it brought later lead to her suicide.

These occurrences connect well to the events of the small circle of job opportunities and the spiral it put the protagonist, Esther, through in *The Bell Jar* when compared. They could be considered historical examples of the vital effects of societal norms on career choices.

1.2) Purity stereotype: hypocrites.

The purity stereotype can be described as the anticipation of remaining completely sexless prior to marriage—that is, without any sexual thoughts, feelings, or behaviors.⁶ The stereotype of purity created by societies served as a tool to control people through the fear of

⁵ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master’s House.”

⁶ “What Is Purity Culture?” Linda Kay Klein, 23 Feb. 2022, <https://lindakayklein.com/what-is-purity-culture/>.

not being accepted or not being respected if an individual falls out of the “acceptable.” spectrum. Multiple religions and various world views have contributed to the purity stereotype, which may include males as well but mostly towards women of the said culture.

In the book, purity comes across as a part of the protagonist’s dilemma, made clear by the declaration of her mentioning that at the age of nineteen, “purity was a significant issue.” This even leads to the extent of society’s thought vision of hers- where she “saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t, and this seemed the only significant difference between one person and another.” As Esther Greenwood thought and believed that everybody was supposed to be pure; therefore the same rules went for everyone, which she realized later was not the case, consequently feeling she had been manipulated, which made her furious. In the part of the book where she finds out that Buddy Willard “had lost his purity and his virginity,” she feels “frozen up” by the discovery of it, feeling tricked and betrayed, leading her to continue with the questioning and finding out through other people that the societal norms towards men, while still existing, were frequently violated “seniors said most boys were like that, and you couldn’t honestly accuse them of anything until you were pinned or engaged to be married.” Showing that even the co-existing social norms were applied differently in action.

Sylvia Plath gave great importance to this issue while explaining it and molding it into Esther Greenwood’s character arch and development story. It was significantly represented in the book as it was a big part of the society of America during the fifties, gaining its historical significance with many publications made about said times, such as “The Unrealistic Sex” in

Collier's article from 1952, debating the differences in nature and the differences of needs between men and women.

With this understanding of the purity stereotype surrounding the atmosphere of America, many details of the book resembled the reality that women faced in the 1950s.

1.3) Domesticity expectancy/ cult of domesticity

"The cult of domesticity was a value system in white upper-and-middle-class homes in the United States during the 19th century that emphasized woman's embodiment of virtue."⁷

In the America of 1950, it was a common idea that a women's job was to serve mainly; their man in the beginning and later the world; in terms of reproduction and motherhood, it was expected that a woman should be enthusiastic about starting a family and raising their children, with the biggest passion of creating a world for themselves at home. The women who fit into this category seemed elite, and those who didn't were deemed unholy.

The same issue of the limitations on women's lives of the domesticity expectancy presents itself in the book with the many interactions of the protagonist' with other women, such as Dodo Convey, who represented the housewife image perfectly with being a stay-at-home wife-mom with her children who were "A Catholic who had gone to Barnard and then married an architect who had gone to Columbia and was also a Catholic." "A big, rambling house," which seemed the appropriate life in society, with Esther phrasing it as "The whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood." (Plath, page 112), referring to the idea that

⁷ Keister, Lisa A. (2011). *Inequality: A Contemporary Approach to Race, Class, and Gender*.

Cambridge: [Cambridge University Press](#). pp. 228–230. [ISBN 978-0-521-68002-8](#).

this kind of life that Dodo Convey lived, was the expectancy from every woman and the necessity of fitting in with the public.

At the same time, the cult of domesticity was known to affect every part of American Society, including the media: “The image of American women in the 1950s was heavily shaped by popular culture: the ideal suburban housewife who cared for the home and children appeared frequently in women's magazines, in the movies, and on television.”⁸ With the publicity effect, the stereotypical roles for women seemed stable and unquestionable. Historian Barbara Welter wrote in a 1966 article, *True Womanhood*, held that women were designed exclusively for the roles of wife and mother and were expected to cultivate piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity in all their relations. Also exclusive was their “sphere,” or domain of influence, which was confined completely to the home. Thus the Cult of Domesticity “privatized” women’s options for work, education, voicing opinions, or supporting reform. Arguments of biological inferiority led to pronouncements that women were incapable of effectively participating in politics, commerce, or public service. In return for a husband’s provision of security and protection, which by physical nature she required, the true woman would take on the obligations of housekeeping, raising good children, and making her family’s home a haven of health, happiness, and virtue. All society would benefit from her performance of these sacred domestic duties”⁹

⁸ <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/women-1950s>

⁹ <https://americainclass.org/the-cult-of-domesticity/> (Barbara Welter, 1966 article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860.”) (Advisor: Lucinda MacKethan, Professor Emerita, Department of English, North

While the domesticity and its absurd culture can be seen in the novel throughout, the force to obey these conditions didn't take part as much as it was the reality for some women during the fifties in America whose fate was destined as being wives and mothers, acknowledging that Esther Greenwood was still profoundly affected by the roots of these social effects in nature and in perspective on life leading her to struggle with finding a lifepath for herself, it should also be mentioned that she was described as someone who was more or so free in choosing her lifestyle. Therefore, the book and reality resembled each other to an extent in the context of the cult of domesticity and its effects.

2) 1950s view on mental health and modern medicine

During this time, mental health and its problems mainly led the people who seemed to have these illnesses to get addressed as insane or crazy and were usually excluded from society. "In the 1950s, ignorance about mental health meant extreme stigma and fear surrounding it. People with mental health problems were considered 'lunatics' and 'defective' and were sent off to asylums. 'Insanity' was considered incurable, and there was no incentive to treat it."¹⁰ Hence the stigma explored caused these people to never continue their life as normal.

This situation was also explored in the book thoroughly; in the sequence of events, from the start until the end, Esther's mental health decayed more and more, giving an in-depth, personal view of psychotic depression. Illness's effects on her place in society were visible when Esther got seemingly better and was getting ready to leave the asylum she was in. An example

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¹⁰ "Our History." Mental Health Foundation, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/our-history>.

of this was the phrase given nearly at the end of the novel, where the doctor at the mentioned asylum said that many people would treat Esther differently, “gingerly,” and addressed it with the simile of “like a leper with a warning bell.” Following this, interaction with Buddy Willard showed how she was going to be seen in the eyes of men in general, saying, “I wonder whom you'll marry now, Esther,” which continued with Esther declaring that she had no idea who would marry her now, after the fact that she now had been in an asylum (Esther, page 231) With these statements, it is shown with an imaginative, kind but realistic tone that a diagnosis of mental illness meant more than an illness in society and would affect an individual's life from the root, the said stigma's reality was supported by the book with the consequences the characters had to endure because they were deemed as forever insane.

At the same time, medical treatments started to be widely used on patients, which included: “The introduction of the first antipsychotic (chlorpromazine) in the first half of the 1950s and the first antidepressant (imipramine) in the late 1950s is said to have profoundly changed practices and to have integrated psychiatry into the field of modern medicine.”¹¹ The practice of lobotomies and electroconvulsive therapy became common, and it had radically opposed views from the public, but it continued to be practiced up until the late fifties. In the book “*The Bell Jar*,” with the first trial of treatment of electroconvulsive therapy, the protagonist's terrible experience is mentioned, “Then something bent down and took hold of

¹¹ Majerus, Benoît. “Making Sense of the 'Chemical Revolution'. Patients' Voices on the Introduction of Neuroleptics in the 1950s.” *Medical History*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Jan. 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4847378/>.

me and shook me like the end of the world.” She continued by describing the suffering as “and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.” Creating an understanding that she was terrified, and it caused constant trauma in her, with excessive pain. This is now proven by research to be the actual case back then “It is known that ECT was benefiting patients then (during ’50s), but there is also a lot of evidence from that period showing that ECT, and the threat of it, were used in mental hospitals to control difficult patients and to maintain order on wards. ECT was also physically dangerous when first developed.”¹²

As a result, the effects and usage of psychiatric treatments were highly similar between the book and the reality, as can be seen in the personal experience told of Esther’s, matching up with the ways the psychiatric medicine and its treatments were known to be performed.

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[1950 To the Present: Drug Therapy: - Missouri Secretary of State
https://www.sos.mo.gov › quest › treatment › 1950-now](https://www.sos.mo.gov › quest › treatment › 1950-now)

3) A Detailed Background to 1950's Atmosphere of America and Sylvia Plath's

Storytelling(worldbuilding)

One of the main points of this investigation is answering whether or not the book represented reality accurately, and the background of 1950's America must be explored and questioned if the book's worldbuilding mainly related to life during those times in general.

Prior history research shows that America in those years seemed like the booming years, a golden age in the public eye, with the economy and military strengthening. Still, problems of injustice, restricted world views, forced agenda of uniformity, and societal norms lay within the glory. It is mentioned in an essay by Alan Brinkley that "the injustices and dislocations of the time often seemed hidden under a haze" and that it remained "stifling to alternate views" beneath the glory of the rise of the American nation in the fifties.¹³ In other words, between the blooming of the culture, the resistance of minorities became more powerful, and the want for change got louder and more powerful and created a base for the Cold War. This environment and what it's like for a regular person in society can be seen through the eyes of Esther, as the title of the book and the repetition of it, the Bell Jar motif, came up time after time and became one of the most important metaphors. It can be seen as describing the sheltered, pressured life in all its glory. The bell jar metaphor was used to insinuate many things, such as the basic reality of Esther's madness and mental illness and how

¹³ "The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Advanced Placement United States History Study Guide." The Fifties | AP US History Study Guide from The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 10 Apr. 2012, <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/fifties/essays/fifties>.

it keeps her from the world sheltered and distorts her perspective of reality. This could also be interpreted in the context of worldbuilding as the subtle but constant anxiety and pressure coming from living in this so-called flawless, new society and having doubts about its reality where nobody else seems to agree or feel the same, other than a few minorities that yet have such a little power. The bell jar keeps a person from interacting with others freely, forces them to stay primarily silent and to act according to uniformity, being barely able to breathe but not suffocate either. It represents the pressure created by the norms of the 1950s world. "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream." (Plath, pg 217) It lets one live with the constant feeling of loneliness and hopelessness, the feelings which were still felt by the public in the fifties but which had been repressed under the Bell Jar.

Conclusion

From my observation, the book can be used as an informal historical reference, not as formal data, but especially for the insider perspective it may provide for the general atmosphere and the blunt reality it offers about women's lives in the 50s.

All in all, with the resources provided and data concerning the issues of this evaluation, and the comparison of it to the book *The Bell Jar*, it is concluded that the book represents the atmosphere of 1950s America and the effects of its norms on women effectively. Explicitly concerning the points of women's role in society, discrimination in the work field, the purity stereotype and the existence of hypocrites, cult of domesticity; also the 1950s view on mental health and modern medicine with the worldbuilding and personal representation from a public eye. From a person of the crowd with both subjective and objective opinions and leading the decision of the evaluation to be that the book consists of a representative narration between the plot line of the text and the reality of its' time.

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