

EXTENDED ESSAY

SUBJECT: ENGLISH B HL

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Topic: The use of symbolism in “The Bell Jar” and its portrayal of women’s mental health in
1950s

Research Question

How does Sylvia Plath’s use of symbolism in *The Bell Jar* reflect Esther Greenwood’s
psychological state?

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INTRODUCTION

Women in 1950s America were socially constructed as being ideal wives, mothers and smiling secretaries who were happy to be invisible. (Friedan, 1963) However, beneath the surface of this facade of domesticity and suburban normalcy lay a quiet crisis: the mental health breakdown of women who had been psychologically and societally conditioned to suppress their ambition, emotion and desires. Women experiencing mental illness were therefore not viewed as needing help, but rather as failures at being feminine, and needed to be "fixed." (Meyerowitz, 1993). In many ways, Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, is the best representation of how American women in the 20th century were viewed and how easily the line can blur between mental illness and social conformity. *The Bell Jar* portrays the life of the main character, Esther Greenwood, who has a modeling scholarship and a promising future ahead of her, yet is crushed by her own identity crisis and depression that are further compounded by the patriarchal forces against women in America in 1953. As Esther herself observes, "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (Plath, p.72), a moment that captures her resistance to the domestic role society demanded of her.

The Bell Jar reveals how much both Esther and the world around her are fighting the same battle, which is to repress her existence, and thus escape into electric shock treatments to transform herself into the person that society wants her to be. Plath's masterpiece, based on her own horrific experiences with mental illness and her subsequent hospitalizations, offers a powerful examination of the personal and emotionally relatable realities of living when social demands require cheerful participation, and punishment will follow for non-compliance. (Konain, 2025, p. 4)

The Bell Jar reflects how a fractured self can be punished by a culture. Esther's inner problems become together with outer pressures, by this Plath wanted to show that depression is not just an

experience but a product of the unrealistic societal pressures using symbolism. This essay will explore how does Sylvia Plath's use symbolism in *The Bell Jar* reflect Esther Greenwood's psychological state?

The research question will be focusing on how symbols most explicitly developed, such as the bell jar, the fig tree, newspaper headlines, and mirror symbolisms. These symbols will be analyzed through 1950s cultural restrictions on women in America, and its connection to depression and recovery. Close reading will be backed up with selected secondary resources that criticize on Plath and women's mental health in mid 20th century.

HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

First, a review into both socio-cultural context of 1950s America and the author's biography is crucial for understanding and analysing *The Bell Jar* correctly. The novel represents and reveals its history realistically. The image of perfect woman which is idealized by the Post-World War II American society forced women to be housewives without any self-dependence, job or hobbies for the domestic service. Historians such as Elaine Tyler May describes this ideology as "domestic containment," where women's fulfilment was equated with stable family and national security. Women who violated these norms are often relegated to social isolation and are faced with mental health issues. Through Plath's novel, it is evident that Esther Greenwood is a product of this society and is faced with issues of conformity and its effects on women who could not conform.

The mental health care of 1950s America contributed to these norms for women. Female mental illnesses were often seen as a failure of the ideology of perfect women and femininity. Women's depression, anxiety and dissatisfaction due to this social pressure were not treated because of this social injustice but as signs as personal weakness. Treatments for mental illness in women, such

as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), enforced rest cures, and hospitalization, silencing rather than supporting their recovery (Braslow, 1997). The treatments as represented in the novel serves as a reflection of this system.

When the Esther Greenwood's mind got a close look, it can be read as a response to cultural restrictions at that time. Esther's descent into depression is not only caused her inner struggles but the enormous societal pressures on women to fit the ideal women figure. Her struggle with this situation also reflects a larger problem in the 1950s American society, the barriers that faced by women who stood up and had betrayed the ideology.

Sylvia Plath's life mirrors Esther's experiences. In 1953, the year that *The Bell Jar* takes place, Plath was in severe depression which caused her to commit her first suicide attempt and admitted for mental illness treatment. Her electroconvulsive therapy was very traumatic and disorienting procedure for her. Plath's own experiences helped her to reflect Esther's herself with no mistake from reality. This allowed Plath for to present her mental illness truthfully. Due to her past traumatic experiences with the psychiatric system, she criticizes the system and the pressure of society, these are brought into her storytelling through descriptions and symbols.

Furthermore, Plath's use of symbolism reveals her want to make the invisible visible. In an era where women psychology was ignored constantly, underestimated or medicalized without further digging. The novel doesn't not only tell Esther's mental illness, but it also reveals her situation realistically for readers to understand its roots I both personal trauma and cultural suppression.

SYMBOLISM IN THE BELL JAR AND ANALYSIS

THE BELL JAR: SUFFOCATION, ISOLATION, and DEPRESSION

The bell jar is an essential symbol in the novel *The Bell Jar*. It is used as a metaphor for Esther Greenwood's psychological states throughout the novel. When compared, the bell jar symbolizes the overall condition of mental health and her perception of reality while others represent specific aspects of Esther's depression. Plath's usage of this symbol as an image of enclosure and suffocation allows the readers to experience its isolating and distortive effects.

The clearest example of the usage of the bell jar symbol is that when Esther describes herself as being "under a glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (Plath, p.178), an image that represents both physical and psychological stagnation of Esther. The bell jar symbolizes Esther's feels that cut off from the outside world which makes her not able to live life in a meaningful and effective way. She feels separated from whom that functions normally, trapped in her mind that distorts reality. This situation is a key feature of depression, which is emotional detachment from reality. The "sour air" symbolizes Esther's cyclical self-destructive thoughts. Without any fresh air in the jar, Esther's thoughts began to circulate and become toxic. This reflects how fast and powerful can negative thoughts reinforce one another.

The more Esther's mental state worsens, the more the bell jar becomes crushing. She imagines the sour air growing more toxic and makes her to think existing within this mental space becomes unbearable. The bell jar captures how can depression feel like trapped in a closet space, where the mind becomes a a place where the mind becomes a prison rather than a refuge. She feels trapped and unable to choose or change her circumstances. "The air of the bell jar wadded around me and I couldn't stir." (Plath, p.178)

Luke Ferretter argues that *The Bell Jar* critiques psychiatric institutions that regulated female behavior under the guise of treatment. While this interpretation highlights institutional power in

some ways, Plath complicates is by Esther's enclosure begins far greater before her hospitalization. The novel descends in ordinary life, suggesting that social expectations have already been internalized. Restriction is therefore not only medical but cultural. Through *The Bell Jar*, Plath represents psychological fragmentation as the absorbed consequence of social containment.

On a broader level, it can be seen that Esther's psychological state worsens as the pressure on female gets more intense in 1950s American society. Among the other symbols in the novel, the bell jar reflects Esther's psychological state more altogether with representing isolation, distorted perception, and depression. Plath structures the novel around this symbol shows that Esther's mental illness is not oppressed but placed at the core of narrative.

THE FIG TREE: PARALYSIS, CHOICE, and IDENTITY LOSS

Esther Greenwood's the fig tree symbol is one of the most famous passages in *The Bell Jar*. "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America." (Plath, 73).

In this fig tree metaphor, it can be seen that Esther's life choices transformed into branches of a fig tree which represents her different possible futures. She sees "a husband and a happy home," herself as a "a famous poet," "a brilliant professor," among many others. Even if she wants to be every possible version of herself, she realizes that choosing one is to give on other choices. This symbol reveals Esther's inability to make decisions and the features of her depression. Esther states that she wants to be every possible version of herself but she becomes immobilised by the

abundance of opportunities. The fig tree symbol reflects that identity is fixed and mutually exclusive for Esther.

Milica Đorđević argues about patriarchal ideology forces women into roles that restrict women and which is far away from what women actually wants, which intensifies Esther's imbalance. She claims that "the pressure to conform to traditional femininity fractures Esther's identity" (Đorđević 4). The fig tree represents this by separating domestic from intellectual paths. However, Plath challenges this reading by highlighting limitation but from abundance. For Esther, identity becomes intolerable because it cannot be desegregated. Plath uses this symbolism to represent the culture that forces women into narrow identities.

The fig tree also reveals gender injustice and unrealistic expectations placed upon women in 1950s America. The figs that represent Esther's possible futures are largely incompatible, suggesting that society does not allow women to combine different roles. Furthermore, the figs rotting while Esther remains frozen beneath the tree reflect her disoriented sense of self-worth. The fig tree symbol captures Esther's fears and pressures she feels, revealing how depression magnifies the consequences of choice until action becomes impossible.

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES: OBSESSION, DEATH, and DEPRESSIVE RUMINATION

Newspaper headlines are another important symbol in *The Bell Jar*, acts as a symbol of Esther Greenwood's fixation on death, derealization, and growing emotional numbness. Newspaper headlines first appear early in the novel, Esther is repeatedly drawn to headlines of executions, accidents, and violent deaths. "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers –

goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway.”(Plath, p.1)

Headlines represent Esther’s intrusive thoughts and her mind that circles obsessively around ideas of finality. Headlines reduce complex human experiences to brief, factual summaries and stripping individuals of emotion and individuality. So that, Esther’s attraction to this form of language reflects her own emotional numbness. Throughout the novel, as her depression worsens, she begins to mirror the detached tone of the headlines she reads, and she begins to engage with death intellectually rather than emotionally. Plath uses this symbol to show how depression can create emotional distance. However, the symbolism of headlines reaches to its peak when Esther herself becomes the subject of the news, a headline later in the novel. This happens after her disappearance, she learns that her absence has been reported, and she realizes that she is no longer a reader of headlines because she became one. This moment highlights Esther’s emotional detachment from her own existence. Her reaction is distant and unreal instead of feeling distressed or shocked. Plath uses this symbolic reversal to reveal how serious Esther has internalized the dehumanizing logic of depression.

Deborah Batten argues that through Plath’s headline symbolism Esther becomes “divided between spectacle and self” (Batten, 112). This interpretation is supported by the headline symbolism, however, Plath challenges Batten’s argument by retaining Esther’s retro perspective narration. Through the symbolism of headlines, Plath constructs identity as vulnerable to external reduction while simultaneously resisting complete erasure.

On a broader level, Esther’s appearance in the newspaper’s critiques society’s shallow engagement with mental illness. Sylvia Plath suggests that society that reduces psychological distress to a

curiosity is failing to provide support. Through the newspaper headlines symbol, Plath transforms Esther's psychological journey from observer to object. This symbolic development reveals Esther's identity loss and detachment, exhibiting how depression erases the boundary between self and annihilation.

MIRRORS: ALIENATION, DISSOCIATION, and FRAGMENTED IDENTITY

The mirror symbol in *The Bell Jar* plays an important role in reflecting the distorted perception of Esther Greenwood's identity and her mental illness. It can be seen in some moments in the novel that Esther fails to recognize herself anymore, she sees herself as unfamiliar and strange. Every time she looks at the mirror, she sees a stranger, rather than herself. She broke the thin string between real and unreal, now this distorted self is her reality. "...I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked." (Plath, p.16) Through this symbol, Plath demonstrates how depression disrupts Esther's perception of her own identity.

Looking at a mirror does not comfort her it wakens up the feeling of depersonalization in her. This detachment reflects Esther's emotional emptiness and her inability to be present in her own life. Besides that, mirror also symbolizes the ironic conflict between her internal and external appearance as her reflection becomes a reminder of her external appearance. Moreover, this symbolism reflects heavy and unrealistic social expectations placed upon women appearance and life. Esther is drowning in the image of ideal women beauty, emotional stability, femininity etc. Every time she looks at the mirror, she sees a fully different person than she is, knowing she will never fulfill those standards, and this will haunt her throughout the novel.

Majorie Perloff describes *The Bell Jar* as a “ritual for being twice,” suggesting that Esther’s psychological descent lead toward potential reintegration (Perloff, 516). Perloff’s point of view suggests a possible renewal but the mirror symbolism is far away from such optimism. Reflection does not represent rebirth; it exposes the despair in Esther. The mirrored self does not yet align with internal consciousness. Plath uses mirror symbolism to real Esther’s self-view is starting to get distorted and it will get worse through the novel.

The mirror reveal confusion, reflecting a self that feels undefined. This reveal of her identity prepares a place for her further mental breakdown, which she completely loses her ability to define who she really is. Through mirrors, Plath symbolizes Esther’s depression and loss of identity due to the pressure of societal expectations. The mirrors become into a tool where her identity slides away instead of becoming aware. This symbol reveals the novel’s focus on psychological dissociation and the challenge of preventing a lost identity in a limiting social setting.

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND SYMBOLIC PERCEPTION

The narrative perspective of the book is yet another facet of the use of symbolism by the author. This is because all the symbolic imagery that the main character, Esther Greenwood, is exposed to is filtered through her level of awareness because of her role as the first-person narrator of the book. This is one of the most important facets of the use of the state of mind of the main character using symbolism. Instead of the use of the symbols reflecting the aspects of the environment of the main character, the author decides that it should be derived from the worldview of the main character.

The reader can become even more immersed in Esther's state of being with a first-person narrative. The line between reality and interpretation is even more distorted as the state of mind of Esther

continues to deteriorate, and readers can only view things from her point of view. The reader can view things and situations that are seen as mundane as having a level of symbolic meaning through the inner thoughts and observations of Esther. This literary technique is also a symbol for how sorrow can affect people and cause them to view things in a negative and wrong way.

Additionally, there seems to be a trend of Esther moving from times of extremely strong imagery and then moving into times of emotional distance. This aspect of dissociation, in relation to depression, is extremely evident. There are times when Esther uses a somewhat flat narrative style when she is talking about what is going on in her life, and there is a degree of emotional distance from what is going on in her life. However, there is extremely strong imagery in relation to symbols of the depth of her emotions. This, in relation to what is going on in Esther's life, is highlighted by the contrasts of the narrative and imagery.

Since Esther is telling the story that has already happened in the past from a point after it has happened, there is a use of retrospective narration. However, there is a sense of tension in the text, and Plath has used this form of narration in a subtle manner. Although there is a clear explanation of the events that have already happened in Esther's life, there is a sense of introspection in her, and the images that are given symbolically indicate the feelings that she experienced in the situation. There is a multi-layered narrative voice that indicates to the reader the pain that Esther is experiencing.

As such, it is not possible to discuss the symbolism in the work of Plath without the storyline of the book. The symbolic images in "The Bell Jar" are influenced by the attempts of Esther to make sense of her emotional world as opposed to the style of the author. The reader also gets to see the impact of mental illness on perception, memory, and identity because the reader gets to see the

symbolism from the perspective of the author, as the symbols show Esther's attempts to make sense of her world.

Ultimately, however, the narrative perspective provides increased credence to the relationship between symbolism and mental state. This is because the symbolic picture is inextricably linked to the reader's psyche. This is because the reader can experience the story from the point of view of Esther. Therefore, credence is lent to the primary argument that the symbolism in the novel is a literary representation of the mental state of Esther Greenwood.

CONCLUSION

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath uses symbolism for portraying the mental breakdown gradually of the protagonist Esther Greenwood. On the other hand, Plath reveals the social pressures that lead her increased suffering and delusions too. Through the use of symbols such as “the bell jar”, “the fig tree”, “news headlines”, and “mirrors”, Plath achieves to communicate Esther’s intellectual and emotional pain. This helps the readers to fully understand her situation and gain access to her complicated inner world effectively. Plath chose to use symbols and motifs to state the significance of Esther’s depression rather than stating plainly.

The bell jar is the major symbol, which gives the novel its name. It represents Esther’s suffocation under both social pressure and her worsening mental state. The fig tree symbol is one of the most appreciated metaphors throughout the novel. It reveals how far Esther’s loss of identity becomes and her lack of making choice between all of the possible versions of herself, fearing to commit a life that is governed by rigid social expectations. The newspaper headlines are a symbol for the rapid growth of Esther’s emotional disconnection and her fixation on death. Later in the novel it can be seen that she becomes the headlines herself, signifying the loss of her individuality and

freedom. Mirror symbolism is to represent the anguish of identity by showing how one internalizes social criticism and the compulsive need to conform to limiting standards of femininity.

Together, these images reveal that Esther's mental collapse is not triggered by a single event, but by the accumulation of her inner conflicts and outer constraints. Through Esther's story, Plath's main purpose is not simply to narrate the pain she suffered but also, through the use of symbols, to challenge the stigmatization of the mentally ill and to point out the flaws of the society that watches, confines, and oversimplifies the people who are different.

The ambiguous setting of *The Bell Jar*, which Esther admits herself might have another psychological breakdown again reveals that healing is a fragile state and not something that is stable. Ultimately, Plath's building of Esther's mental illness through the use of symbols, Plath ensures that her pain is not a thing to be ignored. *The Bell Jar* also serves a great critique of the society, using symbolism to reveal how a person's identity could easily be altered or limited not only by the inner world but also by the outer world.

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