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**CONTENTS**

Abstract.....2

Introduction.....3

I. Family Relationships.....6

II. College Memories.....9

III. Men’s Attitude Towards Women In The Society.....11

IV. Other Women’s Lifestyle.....14

Conclusion.....17

Bibliography.....19

**ABSTRACT:**

“The Bell Jar” by Sylvia Plath, as a semi-autobiographical novel, deals with the issue of female madness through the main character Esther Greenwood, based on the research question “analysis of the factors which have led Esther Greenwood to the level of mental disturbance”. In this work, the development of Esther Greenwood’s mental disturbance is evaluated by means of the factors which have been effective on this process. The factors are classified in four groups as Esther’s college memories, family relationships, men’s attitude towards women in the society and other women’s lifestyle. These factors are explained along with the support of the quotations from the novel.

Female madness is determined as the basis of this work because mental disease is a controversial topic that should be paid attention. Although there are plenty of books that are based on the theme of lunacy, “The Bell Jar” by Sylvia Plath is preferred in this work because it combines female madness with the author’s life which enables the readers to understand actual facts about the issue. Another reason why “The Bell Jar” is chosen is that it obviously reflects the social atmosphere of 1950’s in the USA.

All in all, it can be stated that the conclusion reached in this work is that Esther Greenwood’s mental disturbance in “The Bell Jar” is the consequence of her distressed family relationships, unfavorable college life, the repressive approach of men towards women in the society and other young women’s lifestyle.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Where there is mind, there are –inevitably- mental illnesses and this problem has always been a great concern among psychologists, sociologists and writers. The investigations concerning mental illnesses can be classified in regard to gender by reason of divergence of behavior between women and men. For ages, the female has been the one who experienced mental insalubrity at a superior level. There are numerous reasons for this situation which can be sorted as society-based or personality-based.

Society-based impositions of several duties create oppression on women which can lead to depressive state of mind. Women are obliged to play the role of the flawless housewife in order to provide satisfaction for men. The lifestyle that women live must fit the classic way of living in the society. In addition, the problem of virginity has been a crucial matter that is still being disputed. There is a stereotyped judgment that women are obliged to be virgin before a certain age or marriage because losing their virginity destroys their reputation. Consequently, society-based burdens prevent women voicing their opinions. Therefore, they psychologically collapse and begin to lose their forbearance which leads to craziness.

On the other hand, there are personality-based reasons for female madness that is formed by women's characteristic features. Women have a sensitive aspect that guides them to behave unsteadily. This characteristic creates an idea about women as being weak. Due to all of the reasons explained above, women are believed to be more susceptible to mental diseases.

Taking the history of literature into account, it is seen that the concept of female madness has taken place in literary pieces a lot. It has always appealed to writers because emotional state of women is a concept that is frequently encountered in the societies. Thus, a vast number of writers have created distressed women characters who suffer from nervous breakdown or

lunacy. For example, in “I Never Promised You A Rose Garden”, Joanne Greenberg; “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Charlotte Perkins and “The Virgin Suicides”, Jeffrey Eugenides addressed to the issue of mental disease through female gender. Most significantly, Virginia Woolf mentioned the concept of female craziness in her literary works such as “A Room Of One’s Own” and “Three Guineas”.

Sylvia Plath is concerned with the notion of madness. Plath occupies an important place in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature with her only novel “The Bell Jar” and poems. With respect to her life, Plath came across plenty of adversities. She experienced a challenging youth because her family was apathetic towards her and the college years were sorrowful for her. Plath’s dreams about her future life was far from what the society was trying to impose to the young generation in 1950’s which were years of well-rounded materialism. Plath did not consider herself as a classic typed woman who fulfills all her responsibilities as a dutiful daughter and wife. Girls who were the same age as Plath were put under restraint of their family and the society; their schemes about future were limited with what the society desired. This situation created a society-based cause for her depression, uniting with the personality-based sensitivity she possessed because of her femininity. Afterwards, Plath got married and she had children, thereby, her duties mounted up which was preventive for the lifestyle she wished to have: the life of an intellectual writer. At age 30, in pursuit of marital separation and intensive clinical depression, she ended her life.

The early life of Sylvia Plath –namely, the adolescence years- originates the basis of “The Bell Jar” which can be explained by Plath’s own words:

*“What I’ve done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalising to add color- it’s a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels*

*when he is suffering a breakdown.... I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar”<sup>1</sup>.*

“The Bell Jar” is a semi-autobiographical novel (due to the alteration in characters’ names) which focuses on Esther Greenwood, a young college student who has a tendency to depress. The advancement of Esther’s disturbance to the level of madness and her unsteady condition is portrayed in the novel. “The Bell Jar” is structured upon the themes of mental disorder, limited rights of women in 1950’s and the insignificance of customary duties.

Taking account of the circumstances mentioned above, the progression of Esther’s madness emerges from several reasons. The factors which are effective on Esther’s depression are Esther’s family relationships, college experiences, men’s attitude towards women in the society and other women’s lifestyle. In this work, Esther’s getting to the level of madness and the factors that are effective on this process will be examined.

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<sup>1</sup> “Sylvia Plath.” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvia\\_Plath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvia_Plath)>.

## I. Family Relationships:

Initially, Esther Greenwood's relationship with her family will be elucidated which is, as a matter of fact, the fundamental issue in people's lives because parents' ignorance may be the initiator of their children's unconventional behavior.

In "The Bell Jar", Esther suffers from disregard of her parents throughout her life, especially in her childhood and puberty. She does not have a pleasing communication with her parents. Esther's parents are unconcerned people who ignore their daughter's existence. She feels isolated from her family as a result of her parents' reckless attitude. Especially Esther's mother does not mind her daughter. Not to mention the fact that, there is not much argument about her father because Esther's father dies when Esther is only nine years old. Therefore, Esther is being abandoned with her mother, an indiscreet and careless mother, for the rest of her lifetime. Moreover, a great number of family members speak German, apart from Esther. Esther's mother, father, brother and many previous relatives speak German; however, Esther never learnt the language which causes Esther to feel herself like an outsider inside the family.

*"My mother spoke German during her childhood in America... My German-speaking father, dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia. My younger brother... speaking German like a native."*

(Plath, 37)

This quotation from the novel may give a clue to the reader about the lack of communication between Esther and her family. Esther's family is also being introduced to readers through this quotation. The absence of Esther's father is a notable matter as well because the passing away of Esther's father throws her into a chasm which results in Esther's feeling wretched

about her father. Furthermore, it should also be realized that every single person in the Greenwood family has reached a particular position by way of speaking a foreign language; nevertheless, Esther could not achieve that: “*Oh, I can read a bit of French, I guess, and I’ve always wanted to learn German.*” (Plath, 37) It concurrently conveys that Esther is different from the rest of her family, but she longs for learning German in order to belong to the Greenwood family. This quotation expresses the reality of Esther’s becoming estranged from her family.

Esther becomes demolished when her father dies when she is nine years old. She recalls her father with pleasure because she enjoyed spending time with her father as a child. The communication between Esther and her father was quite enough for Esther to genuinely be blissful: “*I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old.*” (Plath, 86) Concerning the given quotation, following her father’s death, joyful days cease to exist for Esther. Additionally, Esther’s father’s death causes excessive misery for Esther so that she becomes senseless after all; she can never manage to cry for her loss: “*Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father’s death.*” (Plath, 196)

In addition, Esther is not delighted with her mother because her mother is a useless woman who is insufficient for Esther’s growing and improvement: “*My mother took care never to tell me to do anything. She would only reason with me sweetly, like one intelligent, mature person with another.*” (Plath, 141) With respect to the given excerpt, it can be stated that Esther is complaining about her mother because her mother does not perform her role as a complete mother. She is not an adequate guide for Esther by not abetting her in making a progress. The reason why she cannot provide the support is that she attempts to get along with her daughter as if Esther is a mature individual. Approaching a young girl as she does is a mistaken



behavior because the perception capacity of a girl cannot carry maturity. Esther cannot think or act like a mature person at the age of a child. Indeed, she needs to be steered in order to evolve into a sane individual.

## II. College Memories:

Esther's college life has an impact on her heading towards depression by means of agitating her spiritual condition. Over the entire course of her education experience, Esther does her best in order to obtain success. She focuses on her classes and studies so hard that she gains scholarship for college, after doing an internship in a magazine:

*"A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself."* (Plath, 3)

With reference to the excerpt, as a result of her accomplishments, she is introduced to a new facility to work in *Mademoiselle*, a prestigious female magazine which girls at the age of nineteen would die for. Nevertheless, Esther is not satisfied with her position, because –as it is obvious from the expression "I wasn't steering anything, not even myself"- she has difficulty in controlling the life going on around her, without getting hold of herself. Esther is in the condition of unsteadiness and inability of control, which puts her in turmoil.

Besides, Esther is excessively occupied with studying and her lessons so that she does not have time to plan her future life. She does not know what profession she will do in the future:

*"'What do you have in mind after you graduate?' What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship to graduate school or a grant to study all over Europe, and then I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems or write books of poems and be an editor of some sort... 'I don't really know,' I heard myself say."* (Plath, 36)

With respect to the given quotation, Esther does not have an accurate goal for future because she is programmed only to work. She feels as if she is in a void.

Achievement brings about worry and melancholy for Esther. She becomes exhausted because of all the work she has done for many years: *“After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping lean out of the race.”* (Plath, 32) Regarding the excerpt, the competitive education system that is ruling over college creates oppression on Esther because she becomes worn out due to her studies. She regards college work as a race which she is about to give up. Life begins to lose its meaning for Esther; moreover, she does not consider all of the studies, prizes and scholarships as important any more.

Due to the whole studies that Esther carries out, she cannot have any leisure time to implement activities which she yearns for. She does not have miscellaneous qualifications which other people at her age attain:

*“I was a terrible dancer. I couldn’t carry out a tune. I had no sense of balance, and when we had to walk down a narrow board with our hands out and a book on our heads in gym class I always fell over. I couldn’t ride a horse or ski... I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn’t thought about it.”* (Plath, 88)

As the quotation reflects, she does not regard herself as a sufficient young girl, as she should be. She is unbalanced, in every sense, and she does not have a distinctive characteristic. She works so heavily for college that she forgets to put her spare hours into good use. She believes she lacks certain qualities which leads her to fail.

### III. Men's Attitude Towards Women In The Society:

There is a commonly known fact in the society that men's domination commands women and imposes its ill-intentioned enforcements to women. Within a state of marriage, men use women as their slaves; they oblige women to fulfill their demands. Especially in the 1950's in America, women are left no choice but to satisfy their husbands at home by way of doing housework, raising up children, tidying up the house, cooking, which is also dealt with in the novel:

*"And I knew that in spite of all of the 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, 97)

The extract from the novel conveys the fact that women's duty is to do housework which is expressed through the character of Buddy Willard's mother. Esther evidently reflects her feelings about women's role after marriage which is to please their husband. This situation bothers Esther.

In "The Bell Jar", Esther suffers from men's inconvenient and annoying behavior. Primarily, she gets affected by the attitude of men such as Buddy Willard, her prolonged boyfriend. Esther knows Buddy well, but until a certain event happens she does not realize the genuine characteristic of Buddy so that after some years she decides that Buddy is a hypocrite: *"...I found out how he fooled me all those years and what a hypocrite he was."* (Plath, 70) Depending on the given quotation, it is seen that Buddy disappoints Esther by behaving deceitfully. For instance, while they are conversing, the subject of virginity comes up and Esther learns that Buddy is not a virgin: *"What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was*

*so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress...*" (Plath, 80) Esther realizes the truth and feels herself cheated. She declares Buddy as a hypocrite because of this incident. In addition to this, the problem of virginity in the society is also reflected in this quotation by means of men expecting their girlfriends to be a virgin because a girl's being virgin conveys that she is pure, innocent and ready to serve men satisfactorily. On the other hand, men may lose their virginity before marriage because their freedom is not restricted unlike women's:

*"It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not."* (Plath, 93)

Taking the given extract into consideration, Esther's point of view carries feminist marks which create her idea about the inequality between women and men. The limitation that is brought to women's independence in the means of virginity extremely bothers Esther.

Furthermore, women's responsibilities that must be fulfilled disturb Esther because they must be completed due to men's oppression on women. Women are commissioned with housework and their husbands' complacency. What is more, women are in charge of giving birth to children and raising them up all by themselves:

*"What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb.' I had told Doctor Nolan. 'A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.'" (Plath, 258)*

As the quotation states, Esther expresses her wrath towards men, because she believes that men enforce and obligate women to perform all of the responsibilities about housework and

children. Esther thinks that women provide all facilities for men whereas men do not have any worry about those burdens.

Esther considers marriage as a “totalitarian state”, because the domination remains in the hands of men. Esther reflects her thoughts about women who must only serve by compulsorily attending at home for their husbands as it can be comprehended by the quotation: “*So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private totalitarian state.*” (Plath, 98) With regard to this excerpt, Esther believes that marriage is a tool that is used by men in order that they can hold the whip in their hands. According to Esther, men’s ascendancy inserts women into a predicament in which women may experience nervous breakdown consequently which disturbs Esther.

#### IV. Other Women's Lifestyle:

Young women amuse themselves by attending social events. Esther does not enjoy taking part in social activities unlike other girls: *"I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react."* (Plath, 3)

With regard to the given extract, Esther is not as much enthusiastic as other girls who work as an intern in New York City and as a matter of fact, she does not want to be like them. She considers all of the entertaining moments as pointless; however, her peers take delight in those activities: *"I was supposed to be having the time of my life."* (Plath, 2) As it is conveyed in the quotation, other girls do have the time of their lives because an internship in a female magazine is a breathtaking experience which young women would die for.

Moreover, Esther cannot identify herself with wealth and sassiness, contrary to other girls. According to Esther, young women at her age spend their time desultorily through taking pleasure from senseless activities which is not compatible with Esther's lifestyle. She does not enjoy idling around like the others. She thinks that other girls are extremely bored with their lives because they cannot get enough of extravagance. This state of mind does not appeal to Esther as it is stated in the excerpt:

*"These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil. Girls like that make me sick."* (Plath, 4)

In regard to this quotation, the expression of “Girls like that make me sick” reflects that Esther would not like to be like those girls and that kind of lifestyle leads Esther to derangement. Therefore, girls’ making Esther sick conveys the fact that their lifestyle is influential on Esther’s getting depressed because she cannot stand the aimlessness of those girls.

Furthermore, Esther does not suit the classical type of women in 1950’s whose single intention is to get married and serve men. Esther cannot stand the idea of serving men by means of housework because as a result she thinks that the whole studies and work she has done for many years would be wasted:

*“It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he’d left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he’d expect a big dinner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s...”* (Plath, 96)

The given excerpt from the novel thoroughly depicts the portrait of a married woman, which disturbs Esther because she believes this work is not useful for them. In addition to this, Esther thinks young women become miserable housewives very early because they desire for getting married to a rich man: *“...they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.”* (Plath, 4) As it is seen in this extract, young women graduate from such tremendous schools which can ensure them a safe career. Nevertheless, they choose to become a housewife, have children and do housework. Esther does not consider herself as the others: *“The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to*



*be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket.”* (Plath, 95)

Regarding the extract, Esther is aware that men use women as their servants and slaves. Therefore, she does not desire to get into commitment with men like the other girls because she yearns for her independence. Married women's freedom immediately gets restricted by men which is reflected through the expression of "...be the place an arrow shoots off from". That's why Esther does not want to get married to a man who would limit her liberty to think, work or achieve in any field. This actuality in the society depresses Esther on the grounds that she does not obey what the society wants her to.

**CONCLUSION:**

Taking the above points into consideration, it can be stated that the relationship between Esther Greenwood and her family, her negative experiences in college, men's domination in the society which restrains women rights and Esther's peers' lifestyle which reflects the classic women profile in 1950's provoke Esther's gloominess, leading her to come to a condition of madness. Plath expresses her feelings about the reasons for her insanity which emerged by her alienation from everything and everybody:

*"All right, you have gone the limit – you tried today, after 2 hours only of sleep for the last two nights, to shut yourself off from responsibility altogether: you looked around and saw everybody either married or busy or happy and thinking and being creative, and you felt scared, sick, lethargic, and worst of all, not wanting to cope. You saw visions of yourself in a straight jacket, and a drain on the family, murdering your mother in actuality..."<sup>2</sup>*

Given excerpt from Plath's journals clarifies her unconventional behavior which is an outcome of numerous facts that were analyzed in four groups. The excerpt formed by Plath's own words displays actualities about Plath's and Esther's depression leading to lunacy, and consequently to suicide. Esther's rupture from life is evidently conveyed as well as Plath's alienation from the society, her family and the environment. The development of Esther's mental derangement is explicitly reflected by Plath.

The disregard of Esther's mother and absence of her father; her college life that is teemed with discouragement; the way in which men treat women in the society in terms of overbearing attitude leading to men domination; and lastly the way of living of young women

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<sup>2</sup> Kukil, Karen V. *The Unabridged Journals Of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.

in 1950's including housework, raising children, serving men apart from creating a career are the factors which bring Esther's madness into being.

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