

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

ENGLISH A1 EXTENDED ESSAY

RESEARCH QUESTION: How does Esther Greenwood, Sylvia Plath's protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, deteriorate as a result of the loss of her father, societal pressures and expectations and her inability to compromise and find some mutually acceptable role for herself?

WORD COUNT: 3999

CANDIDATE'S NAME: AYÇA DİLARA SANCAR

CANDIDATE DIPLOMA NUMBER: 001129-0133

SUPERVISOR'S NAME: FLYNN RONALD RESNICK

APPENDIX:

Abstract.....2

Introduction.....3

Societal Pressures/ Part A: Gender-Specific Career Opportunities.....4

Societal Pressures/Part B: Gender-Specific Familial Roles.....6

Societal Pressures/ Part C: Sexual Politics.....8

Importance of the Father Figure.....11

Conclusion.....14

Works Cited.....15

ABSTRACT:

Throughout this paper it is my intention to explore the following question: How does Esther Greenwood, Sylvia Plath's protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, deteriorate as a result of the loss of her father, societal pressures and expectations and her inability to compromise and find some mutually acceptable role for herself? *The Bell Jar* is possible to be examined from multiple and intertwined layers of psychological distress of Esther Greenwood, which frequents and leaves her as if being trapped in a jar; also because of her feelings of intolerance against female stereotypes around her and causes her to reject all of those role models in order to thrive to demonstrate her own way of being a woman against the social and gender norms of US society in the 1950s, which were accustomed to be brutal and harsh against anything different; a general attitude of the social sphere and role model considerations of the time which is un-prepared at all to accommodate any feminist and/or sexually independent defiance or self determination either.

INTRODUCTION:

“The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence”(Plath 17). These are the words of Sylvia Plath’s protagonist Esther Greenwood from *The Bell Jar*, not as she is describing a library or a church but rather surprisingly her reactions to New York City. *The Bell Jar* is more or less an autobiographical novel of Sylvia Plath with events and excerpts from her life are fictionalized in it. Esther Greenwood comes from Boston to the big spectacular, attractively cosmopolitan, New York City, thanks to the fashion magazine *Ladies’ Day* contest she won by writing essays and stories, fashion blurbs, poems. The reward was an internship job for one month in the fashion magazine, free of all expenses, in New York. Since Esther has never been out of Boston for all 19 years of her life, she hopes that this internship will open a gate to her literary future. What happens, however, is the exact opposite and all the gates close. All the other girls, except Esther get enchanted and enamored by the unreachable yet desirable glamour of the city New York, whereas for Esther everything, everyone and everywhere have this dull uniformity, which oppresses her. As a kind of silent confession, she maintains a persistent sadness and numbness inside. She gradually becomes aware that her high expectations and contemplations about her future life may soon transform into high disappointments. What is it exactly that causes her downfall? Esther’s, deterioration can be explained by looking at the following aspects: the loss of her father, societal pressures and expectations, and her inability to compromise and find some mutually acceptable role for herself.

SOCIETAL PRESSURES

PART A: GENDER-SPECIFIC CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Starting from the very beginning of the novel, Esther obviously feels insecure and ultimately criticizes herself in a way giving clues of mental unease. This undefined even alien feeling shows up again when Esther compares her face to a sick Indian to prevent her from speaking to a neighbor, and when tells Jody not to expect her to come to Harvard for the summer. These are still hidden feelings of hers, which she chooses not to succumb to yet but they have started to propagate.

It will be misleading to say that Esther's unease stems from self-degradation. Her distress is not because of her self-degradation but her perception of the reality of New York, which differs pretty much from the perception of people around her about the city. Especially in 1950's the city of New York, appears as an intriguing ambiance, where people are reborn and create new identities for themselves. In her research article entitled *The Limitations of Language in Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar* Janet Stallard states that, "New York City serves as a microcosm of America's confusing and competing identities" (67). Even, being placed in such a creative environment Esther finds herself uninfluenced and introvert. Esther acts as a corpse whilst her friends get dazzled by the exaggerated charms of New York. The daily hustle of New York does not only leave her cold but, also irritate and distract her from the everyday life she lives there. She was as charmed by the city, as a vegetarian by meat. Esther's detestations regarding the period she lives in New York, are in fact effected from her disapprobation of the girls that Esther came together to the city, who contribute to her disgust. The girls that Esther came together with were hard-boiled rich girls. Compared to the other girls in New York with her, Esther is slightly more than a modern peasant. Even though, she sacrifices so much to reach her current position, sadly she suffers from feelings and symptoms of alienation because of societal restraints. In her thesis entitled *Life Narrative in Sylvia*

Plath's The Bell Jar Iga Drobnik explains, “such symptoms were probably prevalent in the lives of the suburban women in the 1950s when isolation and constant anxieties – not only regarding the political situation, but also those centered on sustaining the perfect standards of housewife, were at hand day by day in an unchanging scenery” (24). Esther is faced with the same reality as any other women in 50s, however she was getting more effected than any other. She wasn't accustomed to being in an environment as New York has, with the perfectly dressed, loud crowds and unending rushes with expensive boozes and dresses. Esther is rather used to being in calm and organized environments as Boston has. Having perfectionist characteristics created by high successes in high-school and a gained scholarship afterwards, she directly has high hopes about her literary career. She wants to write and be taken seriously as a writer, rather than getting married to Buddy Willard as her mother wishes. The first downfall she received is in a lunch in New York that Jay Cee takes her to with a famous poet. While sitting in front of the famous poet and observing his behaviors, she thinks: “This poet ate his salad with his fingers, leaf by leaf, while talking to me about the antithesis of nature and art. I couldn't take my eyes off the pale, stubby white fingers travelling back and forth from the poet's salad bowl to the poet's mouth with one dripping lettuce leaf after another”(Plath 25). The famous male poet in front of her will be accepted by the society no matter what he does, he will be respected, but she will not have the same respectability. The lunch with the famous poet was the actual strike for the domino effect of her disguise from New York and her dispensation from her literary future. Her high expectations about her literary career are nothing more than illusions. She is stunned with the fear that the best thing to happen ever to her would slip away, yet still kind of haggard to fight for anything.

Having said this, Esther still dedicatedly attends to social events in New York, yet almost always as an obligation. Even then she recedes away from the core activity. She gradually becomes more and more introvert to the outer world. She was as if physically in,

but mentally out of the New York. Esther, spiritually swaying back and forth - more back than forth – appears contented and convincing herself into a pessimism evermore which engulfs all what she knows about her being, implies less and less enthusiasm to grab the life confronting her. With every second passing she becomes more and more introvert and cozy in the world of her own, estranged to the simplistic complexity of New York. Her inner person swaying along self-assurance and self-doubt; silently acknowledging the features around her, all inarguably virile and she was alive, surely; but as a matter of fact everything can only be an illusion. With the depression running through her veins, Esther feels only numbness, unable to inflame her inactivated senses; as if nothing more than a corpse.

PART B: GENDER-SPECIFIC FAMILIAL ROLES

Esther accommodates great stamina to nurture her depression in a way as a defense for her inability to diffuse into the everyday public and life. At times, a silence of one's self may just be comforting, though not hers apparently. Even, the brutal city of New York, filled with redundant fools is an adequate justification for her diagnosable depression; her mind and her suicidal impulses do contribute to this melodramatic domino effect. In the inner self of hers, concealed from the rest of the world, she was feeling sorrowful and wistful most of the time. Major societal expectations have little to no meaning for her; marriage, setting up a stable home, having a responsible relationship mainly with a powerful man, setting up a routine for the daily activities, attending to promoter social events are cartoons for her. Daily hustle, which drives people to arrange their schedules were far too rebarbative for her.

Being obliged to exert oneself to the uttermost to achieve an approved routine of life is the worst bereavement one can cause to oneself. American society is considered to be male and sex oriented, having direct effects, which pushes men to be more individualistic and having minimized opportunities to any possible feminist actions to be inflamed. The position

of women in the American society was stated by Drobnik as “American dream, golden cage were felt all over the country. An increasing number of frustrated and overpowered women were a threat to the image of perfection that this social ideology wanted to impose” (24). After two withering World Wars, in the American society, the sex role placed upon women, basically withdrew women out of the business sector. Esther oppresses her inner self, influenced by the placed perceptions for male obsession around her and constantly trying to reject the housewife portrayal which is molded for women. However she is unconsciously in a search for his soul-mate, yet having too many disappointing relationships with men affects her judgments about men and also marriage, which is one of the important expectancies of the society. The way marriage pictures herself in Esther’s eyes predicates only very despairingly. Esther, by imagining her boyfriend Constantin, as a husband, says: “It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curls after he’d left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed,he’d expect a big dinner,... more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted” (Plath, 80). A slave like relationship based on self-interest of men gets under Esther’s skin. In Esther’s sense perception regarding a relationship as a business opportunity were withering enough for a young woman especially in her age.

On the other hand in 1950s US, being married to a powerful businessman appears to be the only suitable life plan one female could have, but from Esther’s point of view, that was nothing more than belittling the female portrayal. Accepting male sex as the authoritative one and female sex as bound to be dominated by them without question was dictated through the minds of nearly all people, in the 1950s upbringing. In her article Andrea Krafft claims “Esther’s unruly body, which prevents her from completing disruptive actions, reflects the way in which the feminine mystique encourages women to replace their personal desires with fantasies of motherhood and domesticity” (287). In the 1950’s society it is a significant

determinant for a woman having a stable life plan with the oppressive husband next to her. Being married to a dominant character creates a disparaging effect towards the ongoing female image.

PART C: SEXUAL POLITICS

For Esther, tolerance of the social norms to men who are silently allowed and encouraged to experience sexual freedom while the same is considered as shameful, dreadful and decadent for women is a subtle discrimination. Buddy Willard with whom she has a nonstable relationship but, who is also a progressing doctor receives appraisal of her elders as a good husband prospect. Buddy assumes that Esther will give up her literary urge and follow the path to be a mother, whilst ironically Esther also assumes that she cannot be both mother and poet the other way round. Men have right to stretch the rules and sexual politics is also shaped for their best interest to the extent for them to decide on what is right for women in general and particular. As Drobnik points out “obsession was not a religious standard, or not even the crashing influence of an authoritarian father or moral mother, but it was the general social ethos of 1950’s America” (17). American society was shaped through the aspects of sexual apartheid, which basically puts forward the male sex but, however the discrimination of genders becomes so embedded in the society that it creates an obligatory perception on individuals.

Esther is not only the symbol of oppressed female in the male’s world but also a type of a latent activist individual of the ongoing feminist movements of the 50’s American society. Usual concerns of the girls in the magazine were not even remotely close to the Esther’s concerns. Her having a very different sense perception and variegated thoughts from the consuetudinary ones, stimulated the psychological state of hers getting worse. With this alienated intuitions in her, she only estranged herself more from the society. More dislike of

whatever she confronts at social grounds conjures her feeling of accentuated domination of all conventional social norms against which she thinks she's bound to contradict.

In 1950's society, sexuality has a great impact on individuals' identities. Concepts of sexuality and virginity assemble and construct a new frontier on behalf of the judgmental society self. At those times Virginity implied a sense of belonging, especially for the women. Concept of virginity, staying pure is the driving force for people when they would intend to cultivate prejudice to one another. According to Esther, being a virgin or not was the only divergent element of the New York society in 1950's. Even for Esther who acts antipathetically towards the New York mentality almost as a whole, virginity stays as the only vital conflict, too. She believes that, the moment when she loses her virginity, it will lead her into a new gate for a different reality. To accentuate her sexual independence even she thinks that she should not be inhibited by the fear of pregnancy and decides to make use of a genital diaphragm.

Staying virgin until the age of nineteen, she's haunted by a panic-stricken question about her ability to attract the male sight. Because in the society, the sexual politics concerning the portrayals of the "traditional female images" implying qualities to be attained and developed by women regarding beauty and sexiness. Sexuality considered as the only significant aspect of the society, transforms the individual's mind and creates a sense of repression towards their personality. Urge of the necessity of sexuality, influences Esther so intensely that her twisted neurotic state of mind combines it with her sexual desires.

Esther's retribution of getting up every morning symbolizes and distinguishes the absurdism of the life itself. Her exasperation towards the stereotyped daily actions is discernibly increased. Esther crawling in her bed desperately says: "I couldn't see the point of getting up" (Plath 113). She neither can find a meaning in life, nor willing to contribute to any

of the daily hurling. The meaninglessness of life starts to crawl in her veins and trigger her masochistic impulses, like a scream for help from the social limitations. In his article entitled *Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar as A Psychological Space*, Mahrukh Baig states, "Esther's self-destructive approach is the feminist response to the social confinements that is not meant to withdraw from the imprisonment of life but to reestablish the social norms" (5). She starts to question her place in the consuming society self and gradually notices that there is no suitable place in it for her. She was feeling as if she had born in the wrong century, assimilated and alienated. Esther sees roads not taken everywhere she goes and ponders all the possible lives she might live. She is so hesitant and reluctant to make a decision for her future that all possibly fruitful opportunities fade away, leaving her with a longing to fulfill her aim ever.

There is a thin line between sanity and insanity, which evolves with the society's requisitions and rose-water morality concepts. Esther chooses to act with her own personal values and perceptions, she decides not to act as the required actions but instead she chooses madness. If individuals choose to perform in full congruency with the expectations of the society, they will as well be accepted as model citizens. If not, then they will be left to be rotten in the oblivion. Esther's feelings of being imprisoned caused by the society's general cognizance was claimed by Baig as "a constant sense of living in an airless environment of a jar-like society results in her desire for freedom that she earlier seeks in death and finally attains through a feminist revolt by shattering the walls of this social bell jar"(10). Having such reaction against the imposed norms, Esther's fury regarding the conformism of the women around her is very open. In Esther's situation, with her reluctant perspective towards the particular anticipations of society makes her mental condition considered as "abnormal". On the other hand her point of view envelopes the same society as superficial and docile.

In fact, she is also totally capable of making her own diagnosis and the evaluation that she reaches is identical with what society chooses to label her. Society shapes, Esther's

mental state in a way that, even she comes to the point of doubting her own sanity. While thinking about other patients like her in the asylum, Esther says: “The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you” (Plath154). Insane individuals are accepted as social humiliations amongst the normally behaved ones. With these common taboos around her, Esther feels more estranged from the New York society, which inflames her to question her own state of mind. Esther’s life plan consists of working hard to achieve anything according to the upper side community, which as well implies, attending the excrescence parties, having a wealthy husband and serve him as long as and in the way he wishes, every single day dressing like as if going to a photo shoot, talking about only money, fashion and exquisite food. This impenitent encompassment, which mainly rules the cities like New York, is very distant from Esther’s mentality. According to her, one having extraordinary thoughts and acting beyond the accepted values is simply labeled as “abnormal or insane”.

Esther, in order to pull her personality together by attracting appraisal of the majority thinks of dedicating herself on something like being a nun, but the facts of modern life redirects her. She sways from one apex to the other as the case with a pendulum. Her disorder in fact appears as a way to escape from the expectations of the society, being set specifically for everyone.

IMPORTANCE OF THE FATHER FIGURE

Esther’s loss of her father at a very early age, directly influenced her and in a way damaged her mentality by leading her to sentimentality. By losing her father, Esther, started to lose her interest towards the reality and found herself in the midst of the inconclusive quarrels she has with her mother. Moreover about the influence of Miss. Greenwood on Esther, pointed out in the thesis *The Bell Jar: A Psychological Case Study* Stephanie Tsank claims that “Mrs. Greenwood, harmful to Esther's psyche through her unyielding passivity, is often

pinpointed as having a causal effect to Esther's attempted suicide. Esther's mother is often grouped with a stream of domesticated women that symbolize Esther's conflict with the surrounding world" (171). Esther's mother is the solid formation of everything that Esther despises which is the female image consisting of factors such as; domesticity as a mother, stable family life and submission to the male image.

Losing her father, Esther lost involvement in life as well, mostly unconsciously. We all know about the psychological studies on *Electra and Oedipus complex* that Sigmund Freud did. In his psychological study entitled *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, Sigmund Freud claims, "in the normal Oedipus complex we find the child is tenderly attached to the parent of the opposite sex, while its relation to the parent of its own sex is predominantly hostile" (371). For *Electra complex* little girls, first embrace their mother as their primitive role model then in due course, the father figure comes into prominence in their minds. As a matter of fact, Esther's constant search for the right man whom will take her virginity as well will be the man whom she had needed for so long, to fill in the emptiness created by her father's loss. Through continuously unsuccessful relationships with men, she was driven into an oblivion that she created for herself. Accepted notions and continuous quarrels were only becoming irrelevant according to Esther's vision of life.

Her suicide attempts starts with eager impulses in her, and concludes with hopeless endings, as if her mental disorder could be curable by ending any possible life chances. However, being fairly eager with the suicide attempts, Esther was trying to create silent confessions about her inner-self. Moreover, with every single step for her destruction, she was trying to achieve a different kind of creation. Baig states that "search for identity results in her masochistic attitude in form of suicidal tendencies, for she views death as a measure to be free and gain a new identity for herself" (2). Esther tries to create for herself an acceptable identity by the society yet, her inability to compromise in any of the social norms, results with direct

impacts on masochistic attitudes. More and more with this bone to pick conflict, she is no longer able to find a sensible meaning in her life, drifting to think about death ever more.

Esther feels like her case is incurable, and assumedly there are two options laying in front of her; either staying in the asylum forever or choosing the easy path and determining her life. Being aware of the action of suicide, Esther gains knowledge of the intense reality of dying. Being in the asylum will imply that she is not the only one who feels in this way and there is not any other particular place that she can feel belong to. Esther's major suicide attempt was overdosing with the pills in the dark basement and embracing her own death with some kind of a tragic courage. Esther becomes her self-diagnostician with the various psychological books that she reads to the extent that even bothering to see an actual psychologist, she had already evaluated her case as the most severe one. After her third unsuccessful attempt of suicide, she opens herself to madness, in the mental hospital.

Hence, Esther observes that the norms of the period anticipates the young women of Esther's age and upbringing to act joyous, content, and determined while she is a pure sample of distress, cynicism, with a bitter sense of humor. In his biography *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, Edward Butscher claims, "The Bell Jar is more than a personal vendetta; it is a solid...masterpiece of sardonic satire and sincere protest, an authentic American novel about the disintegration of America"(310). Her undaunted negation against the stereotyped way of living in a so-called land of freedom leaves her no other way than expressing herself by opposing to all. Esther's relationships with the other gender are hardly romantic, but rather full of brutality despair and unreliability. Most of the time she drifts to the idea that her attitude towards what life exposes are full of mistakes, but again her inner self provides a suspicion that no one else she knows have such attitudes towards life. Such assumption transforms into a feeling of unreality, which develops to the limits of her mentality, and starts encouraging her for suicide attempts.

Esther's losing gradually the grip of everyday life is effected by the role model definitions placed upon her as a young woman living in oppressively patriarchal 1950s America. Her appeal for sexual intercourse is just a strive to achieve an independent adulthood, although unreal where such deeply carved double standards on gender roles are valid.

CONCLUSION:

Hence, the conglomerate of reasons above construct the basis of Esther's endless unhappiness in addition to her predisposition about her father's loss and her silent screams from the jar which she constantly stays, and last but not least her dissatisfaction with the people and places around stemming from her intensely tiresome perfectionist but unstable personality, build-up towards her suicide attempts and mental collapse. All in all no matter what life brings to her, she would still feel as trapped as it is, constantly striving to climb out of the jar that she created in the first place.

Works Cited

- Baig, Mahrukh. "*Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar as a Psychological Space.*" University of Management and Technology- Pakistan December 2013 1.1. Web.8 Feb.2016
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness.* New York: Seabury, 1976.
- Drobnik, Iga Helena. *Life Narrative in Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar.* Thesis. Roskilde University, 2014.Web.12 Feb.2016
- Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey, and Angela Richards: *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- Krafft, Andrea. "*Funny and Tender and Not a Desperate Woman:*" *Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, and Therapeutic Laughter.*" *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies* [Online], 6 (2013):Web. 15 Feb. 2016
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar.* London: Faber and Faber, 2013.
- Stallard, Janet: "The Limitations of Language in Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar." Web.10 Feb.2016
- Tsank, Stephanie. "*The Bell Jar: A Psychological Case Study.*" *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies* [Online], University of California 3 (2010): 166-177. Web. 15 Feb. 2016