This essay will discuss the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and explore the novel as an adolescent crisis. There has been a lot of discussion on the content of the novel *The Bell Jar* and the similarities between the main character, Esther Greenwood, and the author, Sylvia Plath. It seems that Plath is going back to this stage of her life to try to understand what she was going through at the time. The essay will focus on the account of Esther Greenwood’s behaviour and show that it was symptomatic, as she did not understand the state of her depression, suicide attempt, or recovery. The imagery and symbolism of *The Bell Jar* shows Esther was feeling trapped and detached. This imagery suggests that her depression was partially due to academic women not being highly regarded in 1950s society. Through all of the events that Esther encounters where she displayed an emotional detachment, she was unable to comprehend them and offer an explanation. *The Bell Jar* deals with Esther’s journey along the path to adulthood and the confusion she encounters whilst trying to make a decision about where her future lies, this confusion becomes so great it causes her to retreat inside herself in a depressive state.

The novel has been regarded as Plath’s autobiography and is a detailed account of her life when she was younger. Plath stated to a friend when writing *The Bell Jar* that it was “an autobiographical apprentice work which I had to write in order to free myself from the past” (Bundtzen 1983). However, *The Bell Jar* is not a direct representation of Plath’s life and although a lot of the content is similar, there are many aspects that have been altered.

Bundtzen (1983) sees *The Bell Jar* to be more like an allegory where there is a hidden meaning in the story. There is confusion in the novel that suggests to the reader that Sylvia Plath is trying to resolve her past. She returns to that stage in her life to make sense of herself as a woman in the 1950s (Bundtzen 1983).

*The Bell Jar* is an adolescent crisis novel, and is an account of the stages Esther Greenwood goes through in becoming an adult. The symbolic nature of the title suggests to the reader that Esther is trapped in an inner world, alienated from other people. Esther is seen to be suffering from depression, though she cannot explain this. Some critics believe that by the end of the novel, Esther has fully recovered, having gone through rebirth and emerged as a new healthy ‘normal’ individual. ‘Normal’ is, of course, a subjective word and in this case means what 1950s society expected of women. However, others think that Esther seems to be as hostile at the end of the novel, when she is about to leave the institution as she was at the beginning (Bundtzen 1983). Esther is not even sure herself that she has made a recovery, ‘But I wasn’t sure. I was not sure at all. How did I know that someday - at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, would not descend again?’ (Plath, 1963, p. 254). Esther implies that she has been born twice as she describes herself to be patched, retreaded, and approved for road. Susan Coyle (cited in Bonds 1990 p. 54) argues that the tyre image gives the reader an explanation that Esther is not a brand new “tyre” but one that has been ‘painstakingly reworked, remade’. This may be true, though the image of a tyre starting on a new road is not a positive beginning for a new life as this “tyre” can easily blow out along the road (Bonds 1990). This symbolism suggests that Esther may have not fully recovered and that the bell jar may descend again.

Esther’s loss of virginity to the college lecturer is a symbol that marks the end of Esther’s depressive state. Bundtzen (1983 p. 113) believes that this symbol does not represent Esther as a ‘new women’, rather sees it as Esther simply getting back at Buddy Willard. Yet, Esther is angry due to her own repressed feelings about what she can and cannot do as a woman. Buddy’s ability to be able to flirt with the idea of sex while women are to remain pure until marriage angers Esther. ‘I could not stand the idea of a women having to have one single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not’ (Plath 1963, p. 86). Esther sees this moment as her standing up against society’s expectations of women; she is no longer a pure woman. She has stood up and allowed herself to experience sex in a dominated role as men can. Readers can also interpret Esther’s fitting of a contraceptive device as a part of her path to becoming a ‘new women’, as she sees it as her key to freedom. ‘I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person...just because of sex’ (Plath 1963, p. 235). To Esther these moments give her freedom from society’s expectations (Cooper 1997).

The question that surrounds the theme of the novel is how and why Esther fell into this depressive state. Esther does not interpret or reflect on her situation at any point in the novel, and offers no explanation for why she lost control and tried to end her life. During Esther’s time in New York, many incidents took place that showed her falling into a depressive state. This experience was similar for Sylvia Plath as she described her time in New York as making her major academic achievements seem ‘mere vanities’ (Butschner 1976). Esther stated in *The Bell Jar* that ‘all the success I had totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate glass fronts of Madison Avenue’ (Plath 1963, p. 2). In New York, Esther began to show signs she was changing and became very doubtful of herself and her achievements.

During the book, Esther goes through the stages of becoming an adult. For a woman living in the 1950s, it was very difficult to lead a life that did not involve the
identity of the ‘sweetheart, girlfriend and wife and mother’ and those wanting to pursue another life had a major struggle (Wagner 1986 p. 57). Esther’s intellectualness as well as Plath’s would have given them a heightened sense of identity. The Bell Jar shows how society was structured in the 1950s and the effect this atmosphere had on young, talented, and ambitious women like Plath and Esther. In The Bell Jar Plath explored the social oppression that was present in this era, and showed that Esther’s intellectual future was limited because of society’s expectations of women. Throughout the formative years of her life, Esther was constantly reminded that her academic abilities and creative power did not mean much in a male-dominated world. For Esther, finding an identity meant conforming to the way women in society were at that time (Wagner 1986).

Esther was concerned about the social pressures and the limited choices she had as a woman (Wagner 1986). Her confusion over the decisions she needed to make for her future were a contributing factor in her decent into depression. The fig tree metaphor expresses her concern about her future path:

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 Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and south America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out (Plath 1963, p. 85).

All of these figs represent the futures that Esther would like to take, but she is limited to one. She describes herself as sitting there trying to pick one and she is taking so long that all the figs drop off and then she has no future:

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (Plath 1963, p. 85).

Esther’s dilemma is trying to pick what future to take as she can only choose one path. Her starvation is due to her vision being incompatible with society’s standards. Esther has no direction and she has lost her motivation as she approaches adulthood (Wagner 1986).

Society’s message indicated that unless Esther accepted its conventional women’s role, she would have no life in that society. In the 1950s, society had its ways of ruining women’s lives who were too ‘aggressive, too competent and to masculine’ (Wagner 1986). Esther feels inadequate and alienated by the accepted world, as she discusses how she could not and did not want to do any of the things that other girls normally do, like cooking and cleaning. Esther’s remark, ‘The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in anyway’ (Plath 1963, p. 80), shows that she rejected these things, as did not want to live up to society’s expectations of women to spend life serving men. Esther struggled with accepting the few choices in life that females were given in comparison the many choices males had (Holbrook 1976).

Plath has created symbols that show that social oppression may have contributed to Esther’s depressive state. It is clear that Esther is torn between her wish to avoid domesticity, marriage, and motherhood and her inability to avoid this fate. Esther is haunted by images suggesting the ‘self-mutilations’ of marriage and a woman’s loss of independence (Bonds 1990). ‘When you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed and afterwards you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state’ (Plath 1963, p. 90). Esther wanted to have a choice in a society that had already made the choice for her as a woman. There is a parallel drawn between Esther’s electro shock therapy and the electrocution of the Rosenbergs. The Rosenbergs and Esther are the ‘others’ of society, and both were punished for their rejection of society’s expectations.

After Plath returned to college after her time at the institution, she found an interest in the study of ‘doubles’ which was the topic of her honour’s thesis, The Magic Mirror in 1955. According to Gordon Lameyer (in Butscher 1977), this study gave Plath more understanding of her depressive state, her attempted suicide, and her recovery than her time at McLean’s Mental Hospital. The Bell Jar is full of double images that ‘polarise’ the attitudes of Esther toward herself and toward others. These doubles show a better understanding of Esther’s illness and of how she reacts to society. Some of the doubles are positive and innocent, whereas others represent the repressed areas of Esther’s life (Lameyer, in Butscher 1977).

Esther’s first double is the ‘sarcastic and flamboyant’ Doreen, who represents the exciting, nightlife image (Lameyer, in Butscher 1977). Doreen was one of the many girls living at the Amazon with her during her time in New York. Betsy, another double, is innocent and pure, has the ability to make people cry whilst talking about female and male corn in her hometown Kansas. Esther is both attracted to, and repulsed by both types of doubles as the double embodies not only good, but also characteristics of evil and destruction. As Sylvia wrote in her thesis, ‘the double assumes the evil or repressed characteristics of its master and becomes an ape or a
shadow which presages destruction and death’ (Lameyer, in Butscher 1977). When Esther's intellectual world begins to fail her in New York, she starts to retreat and attempts to reject the social world, which is seen as an accepted code of ‘hollow attitudes’ (Aird 1973). This social world is symbolised in her relationships with her doubles. As Esther becomes more depressed, she rejects both Doreen and Betsy's stereotypical images of women.

The reader first starts to see Esther’s fall into depression when she is out with Doreen and assumes a kind of alter ego as Elly Higginbottom from Chicago. This is seen as an attempt to escape her own identity. Doreen is the extroverted side of Esther's nature, as she looks like a goddess whilst Esther's feels herself melting into the shadows like the negative image of a person I’d never seen before in my life’ (Plath 1963, p. 10). It is at this stage that the reader sees Esther beginning to retreat into herself and into the depressive state. She felt herself shrinking like a hole in the ground (Lameyer, in Butscher 1977). Esther begins to try to reject the life of ‘Mademoiselle’ in New York as she starts to push Doreen and her exotic lifestyle away, and retreats into a dull, conservative, and shadowy existence. Esther is suffering from a depressive state as she starts to see her reflections as distorted in mirror images. Esther’s perception of herself is deformed, and she is unable to see a normal reflection of herself anymore. She is confused about her identity as she is unable to see who she is in her reflections.

When Esther starts to throw out her fashionable New York clothing, she has described her actions as ‘scattering a loved one’s ashes on the night of the wind’ (Plath 1963, p. 118). This is interpreted as Esther throwing away a part of her that is now dead, her sexy fashionable New York image and the life that was associated with ‘Mademoiselle’ (Lameyer, in Butscher 1977). This also shows her as rejecting Doreen and Betsy, the traditional pretty girl images that are men’s desires (Wagner 1986). The words that accumulate in Esther’s inner thoughts as she is throwing out her clothes are ‘failed’, ‘batlike’, ‘shadow’, ‘sank’, ‘ashes’, ‘grey’ and ‘dark’ (Aird 1963). These words symbolise to the reader that Esther’s inner self is becoming a dark and sad place as she plummets deeper into her depression and despair (Aird 1963). Esther knows that something is wrong with her but she is unsure what.

When Esther returns home, the ‘last shred of self image’ is destroyed when her mother informs her she has been rejected from the writing course she applied for at Harvard (Boyer 2004). Esther, as well as Sylvia needs writing to function properly and survive. As Marilyn Boyer (2004, p. 199) confirms, the relationship between Esther and her writing shows that her ‘identity is bound up with language…when she breaks down in anyway so does her linguistic capacity’. With this rejection, Esther finds herself not being able to sleep, read, or write as she barely exists in her depressive state. With this rejection from her intellectual world, there is no progression forward possible as her future is blank and all that exists is the present. From this, Esther retreats to the womb, a symbol for her suicide attempt. The reader can interpret this symbol as Esther trying to escape her inner self. There is no explanation from Esther about her reasons for suicide though with the symbols from the novel the reader can offer an explanation (Aird 1973).

The most influential double for Esther in The Bell Jar is Joan, who is a past girlfriend of Buddy Willard, has also attempted suicide, and is in the same institution as Esther. Their relationship develops while they are in the mental hospital together. Before Joan’s successful attempt at suicide, Esther had already decided to reject her, though she offers no real explanation. From this symbol of the double, the readers must reach their own interpretation of what this means for Esther. It is as if Joan had to die for Esther to live, Joan being the negative part of Esther’s life. Joan has been referred to as Esther’s ‘evil double’ as she represents Esther’s depression (Bonds 1990). When Joan is buried, it is as though Esther is burying the unacceptable part of herself, or as Esther refers to Joan, ‘the beaming double of my old best self’ (Bonds 1990).

In conclusion, The Bell Jar is an adolescent crisis novel, in which the heroine is trying to understand her identity in an era where women’s academic ability was not highly regarded. Esther did not explain the reasons for her depressive state, which showed that her account was symptomatic rather than explanatory. The novel leaves it to the reader to make sense of Esther’s changing personality and to explain the reasons for her fall into depression. The Bell Jar, although not an autobiographical account, has offered a hidden meaning of Sylvia Plath’s life through the character Esther. The novel also illustrated the repressive time of the 1950s, where it was a man-oriented world that offered little support for an academically minded woman in search of a life not defined by marriage.

References


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