

Beneath the Bell Jar: Exploring Esther Greenwood's Mental Health Journey in Sylvia Plath's Seminal Novel

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar," focusing on the protagonist Esther Greenwood's nuanced portrayal of mental illness. Through a qualitative approach, the research explores Esther's psychological journey, examining her struggles and resilience in the face of mental health challenges. The study employs various literary analysis techniques to dissect and interpret the novel's content, with the primary data source being Plath's prose itself. This approach provides a broader context and theoretical framework for understanding the novel's themes, blending literary analysis with psychological and sociological perspectives. The study pays particular attention to the depiction of 1950s psychiatric treatments, critically examining their inadequacies and limitations. Special focus is given to the portrayal of electroconvulsive therapy, a controversial treatment that plays a significant role in Esther's experiences. Findings underscore the critical importance of empathetic care and robust societal support in addressing mental health challenges. By delving into Esther's experiences, the research illuminates the profound impact of understanding, compassion, and appropriate treatment on individuals struggling with mental illness. Furthermore, this analysis reveals how Plath's work continues to resonate with contemporary readers, touching on timeless themes of identity, societal expectations, and the human psyche. The study argues that "The Bell Jar" serves as a poignant exploration of mental illness and a critique of societal norms and mental health treatment in mid-20th century America. This interdisciplinary approach appeals to a broad scholarly audience interested in literature, mental health, and social history, offering insights that bridge multiple fields of study.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature, as a form of artistic and intellectual expression, has long served as a medium for exploring the complexities of the human experience, including mental health (Jauss, 2022). Sylvia Plath's seminal novel, "The Bell Jar," stands as a powerful example of this exploration, offering a nuanced portrayal of mental illness through its protagonist, Esther Greenwood (Storstrøm, 2024). This research aims to unravel the intricacies of mental health as depicted through Esther's experiences, examining the novel's character development, symbolism, and narrative techniques.

Published in January 1963, just a month before Plath's tragic suicide, "The Bell Jar" has become renowned for its raw and honest depiction of a young woman's struggle with depression and societal expectations. As noted by O'Neill (2000), although the novel is set in 1953, Plath didn't complete it until 1962, infusing it with nearly a decade of personal experiences and reflections.

The significance of mental health in literature cannot be overstated. According to Katon and Sullivan's research (1990), a substantial portion of physical ailments, ranging from 15% to 33%, can be attributed to emotional factors such as stress, anxiety, and depression. This underscores the importance of understanding and addressing mental health issues, both in literature and in real life.

Franz Kafka's perspective on literature, as expressed in 1915, emphasizes its role in exploring existential dilemmas and the human condition. This viewpoint aligns closely with Plath's approach in "The Bell Jar," where she delves into themes of alienation, identity crisis, and the challenges of maintaining mental well-being in a demanding environment, supported by (Olivia et al., 2024). Darby Dyer's study (2007) on mental illness in literature provides a valuable framework for this research. By comparing "The Bell Jar" with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Dyer establishes a precedent for examining the relationship between authors' personal experiences and their fictional portrayals of mental health struggles.

Mental health is a critical issue in contemporary society, with increasing awareness of its impacts on individuals and communities (Anika & Barman, 2023). However, despite this growing recognition, there remains a significant stigma surrounding mental health conditions, particularly in how they are perceived and discussed within cultural and literary contexts. Sylvia Plath's *"The Bell Jar"* is a seminal work that vividly portrays the internal struggles of Esther Greenwood, a young woman grappling with depression and societal expectations (Kiasat, 2023). This research is urgent because it seeks to delve into the mental health journey of Esther Greenwood, providing a nuanced understanding of her experiences and contributing to the ongoing dialogue about mental health in literature. As mental health issues continue to affect millions globally, examining their portrayal in

literature can offer valuable insights into the human condition and challenge existing stereotypes, promoting empathy and understanding.

The rationale for this research is grounded in the need to explore the intersection of literature and mental health. *The Bell Jar* is often regarded as a semi-autobiographical reflection of Sylvia Plath's own struggles with mental illness (Nazeer et al., 2023). By analyzing Esther Greenwood's mental health journey, this research aims to uncover the intricate layers of Plath's narrative, which reflects both the personal and societal challenges associated with mental illness. The novel provides a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of mental health, as it captures the protagonist's descent into depression and her attempts to find meaning and identity in a world that often marginalizes those who are mentally ill (Hrytsiv et al., 2022). This exploration is particularly relevant given the current discourse on mental health, where literature can serve as a powerful tool to foster greater awareness and destigmatize mental health conditions. By focusing on Esther's journey, the research seeks to highlight the psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to her mental health struggles. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to explore how Plath's literary techniques—such as symbolism, narrative structure, and characterization—convey the protagonist's inner turmoil, providing readers with a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by those with mental health conditions.

This research presents a novel approach to studying *The Bell Jar* by positioning Esther Greenwood's mental health journey at the forefront of the analysis. While previous studies have explored themes of identity, gender, and societal expectations in the novel, this research will provide a focused examination of Esther's psychological development and the implications of her mental health struggles, in line (John, 2023; Dhobi, 2024; Arslan, 2024). By situating this analysis within the broader context of mental health discourse, the research will offer fresh insights into how Plath's work contributes to contemporary understandings of mental illness.

Furthermore, the research will employ an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theories from psychology, literary criticism, and cultural studies to create a comprehensive analysis of Esther's mental health journey. This innovative methodology will enable a more holistic understanding of the novel and its relevance to modern readers. Additionally, the research will explore how **The Bell Jar** can be used as a pedagogical tool to educate students about mental health, encouraging critical thinking and empathy. By offering new perspectives on a classic literary work, it aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about mental health in literature and society, challenging stigmas and promoting a deeper understanding of mental illness.

This research seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about mental health representation in literature. By analyzing Plath's portrayal of Esther Greenwood's

journey, we aim to gain deeper insights into how mental health is experienced, confronted, and potentially overcome. The enduring relevance of "The Bell Jar," acknowledged by critics such as those from The Guardian, speaks to its ability to address timeless aspects of human nature and mental well-being. Through a careful examination of Plath's narrative techniques, character development, and use of symbolism, this study will explore how "The Bell Jar" illuminates the complexities of mental health experiences. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of mental health representation in literature and its potential impact on readers' perceptions and self-awareness.

RESEARCH METHOD

Types of The Research

This study uses a descriptive-qualitative approach to analyse the mental health experiences of the main character in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*. According to Lambert (2012), descriptive qualitative research focuses on summarizing specific events in everyday terms. This approach allows for a detailed understanding of the protagonist's journey and struggles, shedding light on the complexities of her psychological state as portrayed in the narrative.

Objective of The Research

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* focuses on the changes in examining Esther Greenwood's psychological journey. Sylvia Plath expertly portrays Esther's struggles with mental illness, social constraints, and her search for self-identity in a chaotic society via vivid narrative.

Methods of Collecting Data

To collect data, two sources are utilized. The primary source of data is the novel itself, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The secondary source of data includes scholarly articles, critical analyses, and research studies that discuss themes of mental health, identity, and societal pressures. By combining data from both primary and secondary sources, a comprehensive understanding of the main character's mental health journey in *The Bell Jar* is achieved, allowing for a thorough analysis and exploration of the complexities depicted in the novel.

Methods of Analysing Data

In analysing data, the researcher utilizes a descriptive analysis approach. This involves collecting, describing, and analysing data related to the main character's mental health experiences in the novel. According to Notoatmodjo (2002), descriptive analysis is used to solve or answer the problems that are faced. In this research, the writer used a psychological approach to analyse this novel. The

psychological approach is a literature research approach that focuses on psychological aspects that are contained in a literature work (Atar Semi, 2013:45).

FINDINGS

In exploring Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar," the findings reveal a profound commentary on the experience of mental illness as portrayed through Esther Greenwood's journey. The novel's depiction of 1950s psychiatric treatments, particularly electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), highlights their severe limitations and often harmful effects. Analysis of Esther's experiences, supported by qualitative data from literary analysis and scholarly sources, illustrates a stark contrast between the theoretical ideals of psychiatric care and the harsh realities faced by patients (Ali et al, 2024).

This section discusses the implications of these portrayals, emphasizing the critical need for more empathetic and supportive approaches in mental health care, while also reflecting on how Plath's work resonates with contemporary understandings of mental illness and the human psyche. Here are some points that were found and discussed in the novel:

Esther Greenwood's Mental Health

Esther Greenwood's mental health journey in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* begins with subtle yet profound signs of alienation and depression. Despite her outwardly glamorous life as a successful student and intern in New York City, Esther feels increasingly detached from the world around her. This growing sense of emptiness and isolation marks the onset of her mental health struggles. Through vivid and introspective narration, Plath reveals how societal expectations and personal pressures weigh heavily on Esther, setting the stage for her descent into deeper psychological turmoil.

Initial Signs of Mental Health Struggles

a. Feelings of Alienation and Depression

Esther Greenwood's journey into mental illness begins with subtle yet profound feelings of alienation and depression. Despite her seemingly glamorous life as an intern in New York City, Esther feels increasingly detached from the world around her. The disparity between her external circumstances and internal state is stark and troubling.

"I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo." (Plath, 1966:16)

This quote vividly captures Esther's sense of emptiness and isolation. She is surrounded by activity and excitement but feels utterly disconnected as if she is

merely an observer rather than a participant in her own life. This feeling of stillness amidst chaos is an early indicator of her deepening depression.

b. Societal and Personal Pressures

Esther is also under immense pressure from societal expectations and her ambitions. In the 1950s, women were often expected to adhere to specific roles, such as becoming a wife and mother, which conflicted with Esther's desires for independence and professional success.

"It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York." (Plath, 1966:4)

This opening line sets a tone of disorientation and unease. The mention of the Rosenbergs' execution, a significant and controversial event, juxtaposes Esther's confusion with the broader societal turmoil, emphasizing her sense of being lost and disconnected from her surroundings and herself.

Esther's internal conflict is further exacerbated by the pressure to succeed academically and professionally. She feels a profound sense of inadequacy, compounded by her belief that she must excel in every aspect of her life.

"I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to." (Plath, 1966:147)

This statement reflects Esther's growing hopelessness. The burdens of societal expectations and her high standards leave her feeling overwhelmed and purposeless, setting the stage for her mental breakdown.

Descent into Mental Illness

a. Breakdown of Relationships and Academic Pressures

As Esther's depression deepens, it starts to affect her relationships and her ability to perform academically. She becomes increasingly isolated, withdrawing from friends and family, and struggles to maintain the facade of normalcy.

"The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my silence." (Plath, 1966:25)

This line highlights the profound sense of isolation Esther feels. Her depression is not just about the absence of sound but a reflection of her inner void. She is unable to express her feelings or connect with others, which only deepens her sense of alienation.

b. Attempt and Hospitalization

Esther's mental illness eventually leads to a suicide attempt, marking a critical point in her descent. This act is a desperate attempt to escape her overwhelming despair. Following her attempt, she was hospitalized and subjected to various treatments, including electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am." (Plath, 1966:311)

This moment signifies a turning point in Esther's mental health journey. After her suicide attempt and initial treatment, this line represents a small, but significant, reclaiming of her sense of self and a reaffirmation of her existence.

"The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." (Plath, 1966:274)

This imagery of *the bell jar* being lifted symbolizes Esther's gradual recovery. The bell jar represents her mental illness, and its suspension signifies that, while not completely cured, she is beginning to feel relief and breathe more freely.

Esther Greenwood's journey through mental illness in *The Bell Jar* is a deeply insightful exploration of depression and identity. Plath masterfully depicts Esther's initial mental health struggles and the societal and personal pressures that lead to her breakdown. Through Esther's experiences, Plath highlights the complexities of mental illness and the often-inadequate treatments of the 1950s. The narrative's culmination in Esther's hospitalization and gradual recovery underscores human resilience and the ongoing struggle for self-identity. Ultimately, *The Bell Jar* remains a powerful examination of the challenges and triumphs of living with mental illness, resonating with readers across generations.

Representation of Mental Illness

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* provides a poignant and detailed representation of mental illness through the experiences of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood. Plath's narrative delves deeply into the symptoms of Esther's mental health struggles, the psychiatric treatments she undergoes, and how these experiences compare to contemporary mental health practices

a. Symptoms Experienced by Esther (Depression)

Depression is the most pervasive symptom that Esther experiences throughout *The Bell Jar*. It manifests in various ways, including feelings of profound sadness, hopelessness, and an inability to find joy or purpose in life. Esther's depression is depicted with stark realism, showcasing the debilitating nature of the illness.

"I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to." (Plath, 1966:147)

This line encapsulates Esther's deep sense of despair and lack of motivation, a hallmark of severe depression. Her inability to find meaning or purpose in her daily activities illustrates the depth of her mental anguish. Another vivid depiction of Esther's depression is her feeling of being trapped under a bell jar, a powerful metaphor for her mental state.

"To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream." (Plath, 1966:302)

Here, Esther describes her sense of being suffocated and isolated by her mental illness, unable to escape or see beyond her immediate despair. The bell jar represents the invisible barrier that separates her from the rest of the world, intensifying her feelings of entrapment and isolation.

b. Anxiety

Alongside depression, Esther also experiences significant anxiety. Her anxiety is portrayed through her constant worries, panic attacks, and the overwhelming pressure she feels to meet societal and personal expectations.

"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 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, 1966:95)

This passage vividly illustrates Esther's paralyzing anxiety about making choices and her fear of missing out on other opportunities. The fig tree metaphor highlights her indecision and the immense pressure she feels, which contributes to her anxiety.

c. Suicidal Ideation

Esther's suicidal thoughts and attempts are a critical aspect of her mental health struggle. Plath does not shy away from depicting the severity of Esther's condition, providing a raw and honest portrayal of her suicidal ideation.

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am." (Plath, 1966:311)

This line, which Esther repeats throughout the novel, signifies her struggle to affirm her existence amidst overwhelming thoughts of ending her life. It represents a flicker of resilience and the desire to hold onto life, despite her suffering. Another significant moment is when Esther prepares for a suicide attempt:

"The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my silence." (Plath, 1966:25)

This quote conveys the profound emptiness and isolation Esther feels just before her suicide attempt, emphasizing the depth of her despair and her need to escape the unrelenting silence of her mind.

Depiction of Psychiatric Treatment

a. Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)

One of the most notable treatments Esther undergoes is electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Plath's depiction of ECT is harrowing and reflects the fear and stigma associated with psychiatric treatments during the 1950s.

"I shut my eyes and the blue volts drummed and an electric hum began. It started as a gentle rhythm and then a loud whirring began inside my head. I felt the first lick of flame." (Plath, 1966)

This vivid description of ECT captures the terror and physical pain Esther associates with the treatment. The electric shock is described as a "lick of flame," emphasizing the invasive and distressing nature of the procedure. Despite the initial traumatic experience, Esther undergoes ECT again under more compassionate care:

"I felt a sharp tap. A single, wild throb of pure being, a staccato patter of violent, electric impulses." (Plath, 1966:273)

This second experience of ECT, although still intense, is described with a slightly more clinical and less emotional tone, indicating a complex relationship with the treatment.

b. Institutionalization

Esther's stay in a psychiatric institution is another critical aspect of her treatment. Plath's portrayal of institutionalization reflects both the therapeutic and confining aspects of psychiatric care during that era.

"The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." (Plath, 1966:312)

This passage signifies a moment of relief and clarity for Esther within the institution. The lifting of the bell jar symbolizes her gradual recovery and the therapeutic potential of the institutional environment, despite its constraints. Throughout her stay, Esther experiences various treatments and interactions with staff and other patients, which range from compassionate to indifferent. These

experiences highlight the varying quality of care and the impact it has on her recovery.

Comparison to Contemporary Mental Health Treatment

Comparing Esther's experiences to contemporary mental health treatment reveals significant advancements and changes in understanding and managing mental illness.

a. Modern Psychiatric Treatments

Today, treatments for depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions are more varied and tailored to individual needs. While ECT is still used, it is now administered under much more controlled and humane conditions, often as a last resort. Modern therapies include medication, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and other forms of psychotherapy that were not widely available in Esther's time.

b. Improved Understanding and Reduced Stigma

The understanding of mental health has greatly improved since the 1950s. There is now greater awareness of the biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to mental illness. The stigma around mental health issues has decreased, leading to better support systems and resources for those affected.

c. Emphasis on Patient Rights and Individualized Care

Contemporary mental health care emphasizes patient rights and individualized treatment plans. There is a greater focus on patient consent, humane treatment practices, and a holistic approach to care that considers the patient's overall well-being.

By examining Esther Greenwood's symptoms, and the psychiatric treatments she undergoes, and comparing these experiences to contemporary practices, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how mental illness is portrayed in *The Bell Jar*. Plath's novel serves as a powerful historical document, reflecting the challenges and limitations of mental health care in the 1950s, while also highlighting the enduring nature of Esther's struggle and the universal themes of human resilience and the search for identity.

Discussion

Sylvia Plath's **The Bell Jar** is a seminal work that offers a harrowing exploration of mental illness through the character of Esther Greenwood. Set against the backdrop of 1950s America, the novel delves deep into the societal pressures, personal traumas, and existential dilemmas that contribute to Esther's psychological deterioration. This discussion will analyze Esther's mental health journey, examining the interplay between societal expectations, identity crisis, and mental illness. Through this lens, we will explore how Plath uses Esther's experience to critique the broader societal issues of the time, and how the novel's portrayal of mental health continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about mental illness and gender.

Societal Expectations and Gender Roles

One of the critical aspects of Esther Greenwood's mental health struggle is her grappling with the rigid gender roles and societal expectations of the 1950s. During this period, women were often expected to conform to traditional roles of domesticity and motherhood, with little regard for their personal aspirations or intellectual capacities. Esther, who is a talented and ambitious young woman, finds herself suffocated by these expectations. The pressure to conform to societal norms while pursuing her own dreams creates a profound sense of dissonance within her, contributing to her mental health crisis. Plath vividly illustrates this conflict through Esther's internal monologues, which reveal her deep-seated fears and anxieties about being trapped in a life that does not align with her desires or identity.

Identity Crisis and Loss of Self

Esther's struggle with her identity is another crucial factor in her mental health journey. Throughout **The Bell Jar**, Esther grapples with the disconnect between who she is and who society expects her to be. This identity crisis is exacerbated by the lack of a clear path for women like her, who seek to break free from traditional roles. The pressure to mold herself into a socially acceptable identity leads to a fracturing of her sense of self. Esther's inability to reconcile these conflicting aspects of her identity results in a profound sense of alienation and isolation. Plath uses the metaphor of the "bell jar" to encapsulate Esther's feeling of being trapped and suffocated by the oppressive forces around her, which ultimately push her toward a mental breakdown.

The Role of Trauma and Personal Experience

Personal trauma plays a significant role in Esther's mental health journey. Throughout the novel, Plath subtly weaves in elements of Esther's past that

contribute to her psychological turmoil. These include her father's death, her troubled relationship with her mother, and her experiences with sexism and sexual violence. Each of these traumas leaves an indelible mark on Esther's psyche, further destabilizing her already fragile mental state. Plath's portrayal of Esther's descent into mental illness is both nuanced and empathetic, illustrating how deeply personal experiences can intersect with broader societal pressures to exacerbate mental health issues. This intersectionality highlights the complexity of mental illness and the need for a more holistic understanding of its causes.

The Critique of Psychiatric Treatment

Plath's critique of the psychiatric treatment of women in the 1950s is another significant aspect of the novel. Esther's experiences with mental health professionals reflect the often dehumanizing and ineffective treatment methods of the time. The novel portrays a medical system that is more interested in conformity and control than in genuinely understanding or helping the patient. Esther's experience with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), in particular, is depicted as a traumatic and disempowering event. Plath uses these scenes to criticize the patriarchal nature of the medical establishment, which often dismisses the legitimate concerns and autonomy of women. This critique underscores the broader themes of the novel, highlighting the ways in which societal and institutional forces contribute to the oppression and marginalization of women.

Contemporary Relevance and Conclusion

Despite being set in the 1950s, **The Bell Jar** remains highly relevant to contemporary discussions about mental health and gender. Esther's struggles resonate with modern readers, particularly in the context of ongoing debates about the pressures faced by women to conform to societal expectations and the stigmatization of mental illness. Plath's novel serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of understanding mental health within its broader social and cultural context. It also underscores the need for more compassionate and nuanced approaches to mental health care that prioritize the individual's lived experience and autonomy. In conclusion, **The Bell Jar** offers a profound and timeless exploration of the complexities of mental health, identity, and societal expectations, making it a critical text for understanding the intersections of gender and mental illness.

Through the exploration of the multiple facets of Esther Greenwood's mental health journey, highlights Sylvia Plath's incisive critique of the societal and institutional forces that contribute to the mental health struggles of women. It also

reaffirms the enduring relevance of **The Bell Jar** in contemporary discourse, emphasizing the need for continued advocacy for mental health awareness and gender equality.

Analyzing Esther Greenwood's experiences in Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" in light of contemporary mental health practices reveals notable progress in both understanding and managing mental illness (O'Neill, 2000). Modern psychiatric treatments have evolved significantly since the 1950s, reflecting a broader and more nuanced approach to mental health care. This comparison highlights how advancements in treatment methods and therapeutic techniques offer a stark contrast to the more rudimentary practices depicted in the novel.

Today's psychiatric treatments for conditions such as depression and anxiety are more sophisticated and individualized. While electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) remains a treatment option, it is now administered with far greater care and precision, typically reserved for severe cases and conducted under stringent safety protocols. Contemporary approaches include a range of medications and therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and other forms of psychotherapy, which were not as widely available or understood during Esther's time.

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the novel serves as a haunting exploration of mental illness through the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, whose journey is intricately tied to the cultural and medical practices of the 1950s. The findings from a deep literary analysis reveal a profound commentary on the nature of mental illness, as well as the limitations and often harmful effects of psychiatric treatments during that time. Esther's experiences provide a stark contrast between the theoretical ideals of psychiatric care and the harsh realities faced by patients, emphasizing the critical need for more empathetic and supportive approaches in mental health care. Plath's work resonates with contemporary understandings of mental illness, offering valuable insights into the human psyche and the complexities of psychological struggles.

Esther Greenwood's mental health journey is marked by subtle yet profound signs of alienation and depression, which set the stage for her descent into deeper psychological turmoil. Despite her outwardly glamorous life as a successful student and intern in New York City, Esther feels increasingly detached from the world around her. This growing sense of emptiness and isolation is depicted through vivid and introspective narration, revealing how societal expectations and personal pressures weigh heavily on Esther. Plath masterfully illustrates the disparity between Esther's external circumstances and her internal state, as seen in Esther's metaphorical comparison of herself to the eye of a tornado, surrounded by chaos but feeling utterly still and empty inside. This imagery not only captures Esther's sense of isolation but also foreshadows the intense psychological struggle that will ensue as she navigates the pressures of a society that demands conformity and success.

The societal and personal pressures that Esther faces are critical in understanding her mental health struggles. In the 1950s, women were often expected to adhere to specific roles, such as becoming a wife and mother, which conflicted with Esther's desires for independence and professional success. The novel's opening line, referencing the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, sets a tone of disorientation and unease, reflecting Esther's sense of being lost and disconnected from her surroundings. Esther's internal conflict is further exacerbated by the immense pressure to excel academically and professionally. Her growing sense of inadequacy and hopelessness, coupled with the high standards she sets for herself, leave her feeling overwhelmed and purposeless, contributing to her mental breakdown. Plath's portrayal of Esther's struggle against societal norms underscores the challenges faced by women of that era, while also highlighting the universal themes of identity and self-worth.

As Esther's depression deepens, it begins to take a toll on her relationships and academic performance, leading to further isolation and withdrawal. The novel delves into the breakdown of Esther's relationships and the academic pressures she faces, which are both significant contributors to her mental decline. Her inability to express her feelings or connect with others is poignantly depicted through her silence, which she describes as a reflection of her inner void. This sense of isolation culminates in a suicide attempt, marking a critical point in Esther's mental health journey. The act is portrayed as a desperate attempt to escape the overwhelming despair she feels. Following her attempt, Esther is hospitalized and subjected to various treatments, including electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), which is depicted in the novel as a traumatic and invasive procedure. Despite the initial trauma, Esther's experiences with ECT later in the novel suggest a complex relationship with the treatment, reflecting both the fear and hope associated with psychiatric care.

The novel's depiction of psychiatric treatment, particularly ECT, serves as a critique of the mental health practices of the 1950s. Plath's vivid descriptions of ECT, likened to a "lick of flame" within Esther's mind, capture the terror and physical pain associated with the procedure. Esther's hospitalization and subsequent treatment experiences highlight the varying quality of care and the impact it has on her recovery. The bell jar, a powerful metaphor for Esther's mental illness, symbolizes the suffocating and isolating effects of her condition. As the bell jar begins to lift, Esther experiences moments of relief and clarity, suggesting a gradual recovery and the therapeutic potential of the institutional environment, despite its constraints. Plath's nuanced portrayal of psychiatric treatment emphasizes the need for compassionate and individualized care, a theme that resonates with contemporary discussions on mental health.

In comparing Esther's experiences with contemporary mental health practices, the novel offers a valuable perspective on the advancements in the field and the

ongoing challenges faced by those struggling with mental illness. Modern psychiatric treatments are more varied and tailored to individual needs, with a greater emphasis on patient rights and humane treatment practices. The stigma around mental health issues has also decreased, leading to better support systems and resources for those affected. However, Plath's **The Bell Jar** remains relevant as it underscores the enduring nature of mental health struggles and the importance of empathy and understanding in care. The novel's exploration of the human psyche and the complexities of identity and resilience continue to resonate with readers, offering timeless insights into the challenges of living with mental illness.

Since the 1950s, there has been a significant enhancement in our understanding of mental health (O'Neill, 2000). Current perspectives recognize the complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to mental health disorders. This evolved understanding has led to more effective and compassionate treatment strategies. The shift from a purely medical model to a more holistic approach reflects a broader awareness of the diverse factors influencing mental well-being (Ali, 2024).

The stigma surrounding mental health issues has notably decreased over the decades. Greater public awareness and education have contributed to a more supportive environment for individuals facing mental health challenges. This reduction in stigma has facilitated better access to resources and support systems, enabling individuals to seek help without fear of discrimination or marginalization.

Modern mental health care places a strong emphasis on patient rights and personalized care (Darby, 2007). There is a greater focus on ensuring that treatment plans are tailored to the individual's specific needs and preferences. This includes prioritizing patient consent and employing humane treatment practices, reflecting a shift towards respecting the autonomy and dignity of those undergoing mental health treatment.

By examining Esther Greenwood's symptoms and the psychiatric treatments she endures in *"The Bell Jar,"* readers gain insight into the historical context of mental health care. Plath's depiction of Esther's experiences highlights the challenges and limitations of the psychiatric practices of that era. This portrayal serves as a poignant reminder of the progress made in mental health care while also underscoring the persistent struggles faced by individuals with mental illness.

Plath's novel not only reflects the specific challenges of the 1950s but also resonates with timeless themes of human resilience and the quest for identity. Esther Greenwood's journey through mental illness and her struggle for self-understanding reflect broader human experiences that continue to be relevant. The novel serves as a historical document that captures both the limitations of past psychiatric practices and the enduring nature of personal struggle.

As a final point, Sylvia Plath's *"The Bell Jar"* provides a critical lens through which to view the evolution of mental health treatment. The contrasts between

Esther's experiences and contemporary practices highlight significant advancements and underscore the importance of ongoing improvements in mental health care. Plath's work remains a powerful exploration of mental illness and human resilience, offering valuable insights into the progress and challenges in psychiatric treatment over the decades. Through Esther Greenwood's journey, Plath provides a poignant critique of the psychiatric treatments of the 1950s, while also highlighting the societal pressures that contribute to mental health struggles. The novel's depiction of Esther's gradual recovery and the lifting of the bell jar symbolize the potential for healing and the ongoing search for self-identity. As a historical document and a literary masterpiece, *The Bell Jar* continues to resonate with contemporary audiences, offering profound insights into the complexities of mental health and the need for compassionate and supportive care.

CONCLUSION

Esther Greenwood's mental health journey in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a profound exploration of the complexities of depression and the impact of societal pressures on an individual's psyche. From the outset, Esther's feelings of alienation and emptiness signal the onset of her mental health struggles. Despite her external success, she grapples with a deep internal void, exacerbated by the immense pressure to conform to societal expectations. Plath's vivid narration captures Esther's internal conflict, highlighting the disparity between her outward appearance and inner turmoil. As Esther's depression deepens, it affects her relationships and academic performance, leading to increased isolation and a sense of hopelessness.

The portrayal of her mental breakdown and subsequent suicide attempt provides a raw and honest depiction of the severity of her condition. The treatments she undergoes, including electroconvulsive therapy, reflect the mental health practices of the 1950s, often characterized by a lack of understanding and compassion. These experiences underscore the challenges faced by those struggling with mental illness and the often-inadequate support systems available at the time. Ultimately, *The Bell Jar* serves as a powerful historical document that sheds light on the experience of mental illness and the resilience of the human spirit. Esther's gradual recovery and the lifting of the metaphorical bell jar symbolize her journey toward healing and self-discovery. Plath's novel remains a timeless and poignant exploration of mental health, offering valuable insights into the enduring struggle for identity and well-being. Through Esther's story, readers gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of mental illness and the importance of compassionate care and societal support.

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