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The Female Position in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

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Dedications

Above all, I thank ‘Allah’ for giving me the patience and strength to complete my academic journey, which was full of many difficulties.

I dedicate my humble work to the lamp of my life, my lovely mother.

To my beloved father, in loving memory of your guidance, wisdom, and unconditional love. Your unwavering support and belief in me have been my greatest source of strength. Though you are no longer with us, your spirit continues to inspire and drive me. This thesis is a tribute to you and all that you have done for me. I hope to make you proud. To my brothers who are my supporters in life Zoheir and Benyoucef, my dear sister Khadra, you`re like my backbone, always there to lift me up. This dedication is a shoutout to your unwavering support and the bond we share and those close to my heart Faiza and Naima.

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Abstract

Regarding society's limitations, Stereotypical gender roles and the oppression of women are prominent themes in *The Bell Jar*, where the subordinate status of women is clearly portrayed. Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963) is perhaps the most compelling and controlled account of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction. Even though Sylvia Plath went on to become well-known as a poet and her one work has a well-established autobiographical foundation, it is nevertheless a highly notable American novel in and of itself. This research analysis will examine how *The Bell Jar's* female heroine deals with patriarchal ideologies that oppress her in both her personal and public life. This dissertation aims to critically analyze Sylvia Plath's portrayal of female madness in *The Bell Jar*, with a focus on how madness is portrayed as a sort of resistance against the oppression of women in patriarchal society. The aim of the study is to reveal the ways in which patriarchal rules persistently shape the experiences and decisions made by the female characters. The novel highlights the negative consequences of the institution of marriage as one of the main causes of women's exploitation and oppression via an analysis of their hardships, sacrifices, and goals. Plath's narrative masterfully reveals the limitations and pressures imposed on women, showcasing the inherent complexities of traditional gender roles. By emphasizing the significance of patriarchal expectations, this novel seeks to broaden our understanding of the larger issue of gender inequality and the persistent struggle for personal freedom faced by women in society.

Key Words: Oppression, women`s exploitation, patriarchal society.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

In the 20th century, American literature saw the emergence of numerous literary theories such as feminism and psychoanalysis. Many writers of this era addressed issues like patriarchy and the oppression of women, aiming to rectify the injustices present in society.

The oppression and abuse experienced by women often result in depression, madness, and various mental health challenges. Some women refuse to accept these conditions and instead contemplate numerous suggestions and solutions to alleviate or resolve women's issues. The psychoanalytic approach aligns closely with the feminist perspective when analyzing texts that explore feminist themes.

A primary objective of feminist academics is to recover the silenced voices of women throughout history and to achieve true political and social equality between genders. A central theme explored by feminist writers is the quest for a sense of self, liberty, and individuality. They seek to eliminate male violence and oppression over women. As a result, women gain more confidence and strength to confront patriarchal systems and demand their rights. Feminism serves a crucial role in amplifying female perspectives to a global audience through literary works. For some feminists, the institution of marriage is viewed as an impediment to their success and ambitions, leading them to reject it.

The 1950s American culture did not embrace women as individuals with unique identities. Although women were allowed to work and earn money after World War II, during the peak of capitalist ideology, it was deemed unacceptable for women to hold positions of greater authority in society. Even before entering into marriage, women had to contend with rigid societal norms and expectations. However, the institution of marriage is viewed as the most entrenched foundation of patriarchal ideology. It is considered the primary motivator for the abuse and mistreatment of women. Women were expected to work around the clock in this role, leaving them little time for self-reflection as distinct individuals. They were so consumed with domestic duties that they could hardly contemplate their legal rights or basic personal needs.

Female oppression is a fundamental problem that still exists in present day society. The fact that people live in a modern world with monumental technological advancement has not changed the grim reality that some women remain discriminated against and oppressed because

of the patriarchal molded structures. The cultural beliefs, traditions and religions of most societies give more attention to patriarchy, thereby ensuring the continuation of the domination over and repression of women. Any attempt by women to protest against such injustices and meted by the male traditional folk is tantamount to challenging long age tradition and culture which is perceived as a sacrilege, if not a sin. Therefore, she is made to accept her subordinate and second-class position.

It is no gainsaying that women have proved their mettle in social, economic, and political spheres of the society by making meaningful contribution to its development. In spite of these, a woman, is only respected and regarded as fulfilled when she performs her traditional duties as a housewife, mother, homemaker and caregiver who is meant to be seen not heard. Any other role contrary to these stereotypical roles is regarded as an affront to male authority and ego which results in violence and oppression.

Sylvia Plath, born in 1932, was an American poet, novelist, and short-story writer. She struggled with mental illness and committed suicide shortly after publishing her first novel. Plath is posthumously recognized as a feminist icon and pioneer female poet. Plath, a prominent confessional poet, is best known for her two collections of poetry, *The Colossusand Other Poems* and *Ariel*. Her autobiographical poems explore her mental anguish, marriage to poet Ted Hughes, unresolved conflicts with parents, and her own self-perception. In 1982, she won the Pulitzer Prize for The Collected Poems, edited by her husband Ted Hughes. Plath has inspired numerous readers and poets since her 1963 death.

Sylvia Plath`s novel *The Bell Jar*provides an accurate depiction of her own experience through her main character Esther Greenwood, the mirrored version of Plath herself, which the last emphasized on the ambivalence between Esther's unorthodox expectations and the rigid attitude of America in 1950. Esther as Plath wished to pursue her future plans as a famous writer but she shocked of the social attitudes which forced her to choose between motherhood and career.

Although this novel reflects Sylvia Plath's agony and frustration in her life, it also reflects the role which the society was living in at that time has played in that frustration since it was thought society that her frustration emerges. The heroine of *The Bell Jar* is living the conditions in which the woman of the society of Plath's time was living in.

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Esther is presented as the reflection of Plath's life and the various incidents that Esther faces throughout the story such as wining scholarships and her various complicated relationships with men are similar to those of Plath.

Through this novel, Plath is presenting society's role and beliefs towards women at the 1950's.Esther and Plath both shared a deep passion for writing and harbored ambitions of pursuing it as a career. However, within their societal context, such aspirations were often perceived as impractical and limited for women. It is looked at as being an un-feminine role for a woman. Therefore, such beliefs have made the female role in society clearly undefined, thus making it impossible for women to make the right choices in life. Sylvia Plath through this novel wanted women to reject society's constrained roles and to become more independent and self-controlled. At the same time Plath wants to note out and make it clear that if society continues to impose such restrictions on women, this may lead to insanity as in the case of Esther whose constrained laws pushed her to attempt suicide several times.

The novel depicts a nuanced and often unsettling image of the female experience in 1950s America, delving into the disparities between men and women and the distinct social roles they were obliged to fulfill. *The Bell Jar*, authored by Sylvia Plath, vividly captures the societal expectations and pressures thrust upon women, such as conforming to conventional gender roles, upholding notions of purity, and adhering to societal norms. Throughout the novel, a variety of female characters are featured, each either embracing or rejecting these societal expectations, presenting diverse perspectives on womanhood. Within this framework, there are characters who defy traditional gender roles and introduce the protagonist, Esther, to alternative modes of thinking.

The work attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the institution of marriage contribute to the women`s exploitation and oppression in *The Bell Jar*?
2. How do societal expectations of sexual purity and morality influence the protagonist's journey of self-realization in The Bell Jar, and in what ways does the novel critique these expectations within the broader context of feminist discourse on female sexuality and autonomy?

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The research supports the following hypothesis that claims that:

1/ The institution of marriage contributes to women`s exploitation and oppression in *The Bell Jar*, revealing the restrictive and confining nature of traditional gender roles as well as the impact of patriarchal expectations on the experiences and choices of the female characters.

2/ Societal expectations of sexual purity and morality significantly impede Esther Greenwood's journey of self-realization in The Bell Jar, as they impose restrictive norms that conflict with her personal autonomy and desires. The novel critiques these expectations by highlighting their detrimental effects on Esther's mental and emotional well-being, thereby contributing to feminist discourse on female sexuality and autonomy

The exploration of the female position in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* holds significant literary and cultural importance, as it sheds light on the challenges and limitations faced by women in a patriarchal society that imposed restrictive expectations on them. Through Esther Greenwood's perspective, Plath challenges the traditional gender roles and expectations of domesticity, questioning the notion that marriage and motherhood should be the sole pursuits for women. The novel highlights the conflict between societal expectations and personal aspirations, illustrating the tensions and contradictions that women faced in their pursuit of self-fulfillment and identity beyond the confines of prescribed gender norms.

Moreover, *The Bell Jar* serves as a powerful feminist statement by giving voice to Esther's experiences and struggles as a young woman navigating a male-dominated world. Esther's descent into depression and mental illness is often interpreted as a metaphor for the suffocating constraints placed on women, symbolized by the titular "bell jar" that traps them in a state of isolation and disillusionment.

By candidly portraying the female experience and the societal pressures and stigmas surrounding mental health issues for women, Plath's novel challenges patriarchal structures and advocates for women's freedom and self-expression. The exploration of the female position in *The Bell Jar* has resonated with readers for decades, inspiring discussions about gender inequality, mental health, and the pursuit of personal agency and fulfillment for women.

The research methodology employed in this study is analytical, with a primary focus on collecting data for an extended essay centered around Sylvia Plath's novel. Plath, an American

writer known for her exploration of feminism in literature, frequently delves into themes of separation, alienation, suicide, and the struggles faced by women. Her works often draw from her personal experiences and serve as poignant reflections on the hardships endured by females in 1950s American society. This research utilizes an analytical approach, drawing from a variety of sources including printed materials, websites, articles, and scholarly journals. The work adopted feminism theory, with the exploration of American women in the fifties. The review aims to analyze the novel from a feminist perspective, highlighting the broader implications of gender inequality and the societal constructs that influence women's experiences. Through this analysis, the literature review seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel's portrayal of female characters and the social context in which they navigate their lives.

In order to do so, the research will be divided into three chapters. Chapter one is the Literature review where it begins with the historical background of the novel and what has been said about the narrative.

The second chapter is the conceptual part where we introduce the concept of feminism in *The Bell Jar*.

The third chapter is the practical part. It analyses and examines the novel like characters analysis and themes analysis. In addition to revealing all kinds of oppression that was practiced on the American society in general and on the female characters in particular.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Chapter One: Literature Review

1.1. Introduction

In the pantheon of American literature, *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath stands as a profound and unsettling reflection of the female experience in mid-20th century society. Published in 1963, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, the novel presents a semi-autobiographical account of the protagonist, Esther Greenwood's descent into mental illness amidst the pressures and expectations placed on women during the 1950s. The time, one of economic boom and conservative resurgence, saw the post-World War II reestablishment of traditional gender roles. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere, their ambitions and desires often subsumed by societal dictates of marriage and motherhood. *The Bell Jar* deftly navigates through these themes, presenting a critical examination of the female position within this period of American history. Esther's story is not just a narrative of personal struggle, but also an indictment of a patriarchal society that confines and defines women by limiting narratives. Through its intricate portrayal of Esther's psychological turmoil, *The Bell Jar* provides a sharp critique of the constraints imposed upon women, laying bare the urgent need for autonomy and self-determination in the quest for genuine identity.

1.2. Defining Literature

literature is a collection of written works that have artistic or intellectual value, often considered an art form, and can take various forms, including novels, plays, poetry, and essays. Literature is deeply interrelated with culture and serves as a reflection of society, with literary texts providing insights into a society's values, beliefs, and traditions. Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field that studies literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries, integrating literary experience with other cultural phenomena.

Over time, the definition of literature has undergone changes. Initially, in Western Europe before the eighteenth century, it encompassed all books and writings. However, during the romantic period, a narrower meaning emerged, highlighting "imaginative" writing. In contemporary times, there are debates on what should be considered literature, with a tendency to return to a broader understanding. The term is also applied to non-written works like "oral literature" and "the literature of preliterate culture." Although alternatives like "oral styles" and

"oral genres" have been suggested, the term literature is still widely used due to its association with the Latin word "Littera."

According to various scholars and sources, literature can be defined as any published writing on a particular subject, using a specific writing style. It can involve narrative storytelling with characters in conflict or artfully designed images conveying emotions and ideas. The term may also refer to works that belong to major genres like epic, drama, lyric, novel, or short story. Lastly, literature is not just about conveying ideas but about using language in a way that draws attention to its mode of expression.

1.3. Defining Feminism

Approximately half of the world's population consists of women. In various contexts worldwide, women encounter inequality, subordination, and are often regarded as secondary class citizens. Regrettably, they frequently experience oppression, marginalization, and exploitation, especially within patriarchal societies. Prior to the advent of the First Industrial Revolution, human life was not dominated exclusively by men, and both men and women made equal contributions to society. The Industrial Revolution originated in England around 1750-1760 and persisted until approximately 1820-1840. The onset of the Industrial Revolution brought forth significant changes to the global social order, establishing a new gender system that placed women at a disadvantage (Mohajan 1-8).

Indeed, during the Industrial Revolution, men predominantly entered the industrial workforce while women were often confined to the domestic sphere. As a consequence, women continued to face vulnerabilities in social, political, and economic realms. This division of labor further perpetuated the existing gender disparities and limited women's opportunities for empowerment and advancement. The industrialization also developed a new class system; aristocratic class (Anderson and Zinsser). In the modern era, defining feminism isn't a simple task. Today, feminism encompasses a multitude of interpretations, each shaped by individual beliefs, historical context, and cultural influences. However, a shared thread among feminists is the pursuit of gender equality. Feminism is a women basis socio-political movement and ideology, and supports the idea “women should share equality in society’s opportunities and scarce resources” (Delaney). Oxford Dictionary defines feminism as “the belief and aim those

women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim". The feminism is characterized by "the activism for the purpose of challenging and changing women's subordination to men" (Ferree 3-23).

Feminism calls for men and women to have equal rights in terms of politics, decision-making, careers, and childrearing. It is made up of several social, cultural, and political movements that aim to provide men and women equal rights. (Asnani 9-16). It is widely viewed as a movement striving to secure equal rights, opportunities, and dignity for women, paralleling those traditionally enjoyed by men within society. (Raj and Davidson 1-6). It has caused a lot of issues in upper-class Western society, and women have battled for the right to procreate and the ability to vote (Agger). The rise of feminism in Europe occurred as "women of all classes became increasingly aware of the way in which their sex influenced their life chances and experiences" (Fuchs and Thompson). It aims to abolish men's control over women and grant equal rights to both sexes in all spheres of life, from politics to domestic matters (Kuleli 703-720). Various academic disciplines, including sociology, philosophy, economics, and politics, have provided unique intellectual foundations for the development of feminist thought (Herouach 128-152).

Feminism elucidates and proposes avenues for altering societal and environmental dynamics. It endeavors to spotlight interventions addressing both personal and interpersonal issues faced by women. Additionally, feminism offers a framework for assessing the social and environmental encounters of individuals and groups, irrespective of sex or gender. Its impact has been transformative, positively influencing the lives of countless women (Anderson).

1.3.1. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory offers a framework for comprehending and reimagining gender roles, advocating for the integration of women's concerns into social structures. It involves scrutinizing diverse human experiences through a political lens, with a focus on utilizing sex-based analysis as a fundamental analytical tool. Essentially, within feminist theoretical analyses, numerous challenges encountered by both women and men can be most effectively interpreted in the context of sex-based and gender-based societal and structural limitations, which intersect with various other structural and interpersonal constraints. Certain feminist scholars trace the roots of feminist theory back to the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century. These revolutions advocated for the assertion of "Man's" natural rights, aiming to free both women and men from

entrenched forms of domination and the associated relationships of subordination and deference that these revolutions sanctioned. Within this framework, Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft are esteemed as the pioneering feminist theorists, as they were the first to systematically articulate the call for equal rights as a theoretical proposition.

Feminist theory started to become institutionalized academically in the early 1970s with the creation of the first women's studies programs in the US and the first scholarly magazines including or concentrating on feminist theory: Feminist Studies (1972), Signs (1975), Frontiers (1975), Camera Obscura (1976), and Feminist Review (1979). Even within the Academy, feminist theory is resistant to conceptualization as a field because of its interdisciplinary nature. Feminist theory, which has grown exponentially over the last four decades, has been described as "oppositional research", because it challenges the right of the powerful to define realities in these diverse fields, because it cuts across the divisions of knowledge about the structure of modern universities. (Devault 1).

Feminist theories, first of all, explain and suggest directions for change in social and environmental factors that create or contribute to dilemmas and problems experienced by women. Second, they address women's intrapersonal and interpersonal difficulties and offer solutions. Third, Feminist ideas offer a neutral viewpoint for assessing the social and environmental experiences of people and groups, irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation. In each of these three areas, where feminist theory is to be applied, the emphasis must depend on how other factors that affect marginalization, oppression and undue restrictions are taken into account.

The practice of feminist social work begins with an examination of women's experiences in the world and focuses on the connections between a woman's place in society and her unique situation. Gender roles and relationships, as well as their relevance to welfare services and social policy, have been brought to light by feminist ideas. Feminist theory has raised critical inquiries into the quality of interpersonal relationships, advocating for dialogical and egalitarian interactions in practical contexts. Informed by feminist principles, social work practice has increasingly prioritized the perspectives of recipients, irrespective of gender, granting them greater credibility and agency in the process.

The profession of social work is more than 100 years old. There's an equally lengthy history of the practice of feminism in Social Services. Although many social workers have not been open to feminist thought, a large number of practitioners are working in the framework of feminism. Women's social work commitments have led to the development of feminist theory. The development of feminist theory was aided by the 1970s dedication of female social workers to larger feminist movements in the West, which began in radical social work and a broad liberal heritage. Among the main concepts were addressing the prejudice that women face in both life and the workplace, women-centered practices, recognizing the distinct voices of women from those of males, and the resilience of women while collaborating with a diverse workforce.

Feminism has evolved through two distinct waves of development. In the 1800s, feminist activism primarily centered around securing legal and political rights. However, from the 1960s onwards, the focus shifted towards addressing unequal opportunities in various domains such as work, politics, and the public sphere, marking the advent of the second wave which concentrated on social inequalities. Since the 1960s, feminism has diversified into several unique perspectives, spanning from liberal to radical to postmodern approaches. Despite their differences, all these perspectives share a common commitment to personal and social growth, as well as a recognition of the interconnectedness between the personal and the political.

Some approaches challenge the prevailing masculine viewpoint by acknowledging fundamental gender disparities in how people think and behave in the world. Many writers have noted that social workers share the goals of most feminist theories, which include helping to end misperceptions, sexual inequality, restrictions, and oppression faced by women. However, the objectives of different branches of feminism differ depending on how one views the factors that obstruct women.

1.3.2. The Feminist Movement of the Time

The initial phase of feminism surfaced towards, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe and in the United States, was to provide women the right to vote, equal opportunities, and other legal rights. In other words, "it is categorized as focusing on the fight for women's political power" (Lear). It marked a pivotal era in history, catalyzing substantial societal transformations

and laying the groundwork for broader gender equality across all facets of life. This encompassed women's entitlement to citizenship and suffrage, access to education, and inheritance rights from their fathers.

The second wave of feminism emerged during the 1960s and spanned until the 1990s, with sexuality and reproductive rights emerging as central themes of this movement. Martha Lear, in 1968, is credited with coining the term "second wave feminism" while discussing the distinct characteristics of this phase (Lear). It gained momentum in the post-World War II period as a considerable influx of women joined the workforce, prompting challenges to traditional notions surrounding women's roles within the family, workplace, and broader society. Gale's Women's Studies Archive offers scholars a valuable collection of primary sources, providing unique insights and documents for delving into the era of feminism. These resources enable a deeper understanding of how feminism intersects with various liberation movements, spanning from suffrage to contemporary feminism. By exploring the materials available, researchers can uncover intricate details of the feminist movement's evolution over time, ranging from its nascent stages during suffrage to the second wave and its connections to other political movements of the twentieth century.

The second wave of feminism broadened the scope of feminist activism, challenging the patriarchal norms that governed women's personal lives. Additionally, it marked a significant shift from the predominantly white, middle-class leadership of the first wave of feminism. As noted by Alhumaid, the second wave was driven not only by white women in the Western world but also by women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, both in the West and in developing nations.

The Feminine Mystique, written by Betty Friedan in 1963, shattered the postwar notion that a woman's job was to marry and have children. This book served as a catalyst for second wave feminism, which emerged within the framework of the anti-war and civil rights movements. Even though Simone de Beauvoir and other comparable feminist philosophers came before Friedan, her ideas weren't particularly groundbreaking; rather, *The Feminine Mystique* had a far wider audience and made feminism more widely known to housewives, moms, and regular

women. The feminist movement gained momentum, addressing both public and private injustices including rape, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and workplace harassment. Second wave feminists were particularly concerned with unveiling and combating the pervasive, systemic racism embedded in society—an aspect often overlooked by the suffragists and suffragettes of the nineteenth century, who primarily advocated for political equality through suffrage. Recognizing the interconnected nature of cultural and political inequalities, second wave feminists emphasized the interdependence of women's rights across various spheres of life. Operating under a common objective of achieving social equality, second wave feminists prioritized issues surrounding sexuality and reproductive rights as central pillars of the liberation movement. A significant portion of the movement's efforts were directed towards advocating for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Additionally, their agenda encompassed a broad spectrum of concerns, as noted by Haradhan, including ensuring children's access to an adequate standard of living, establishing sufficient childcare facilities, advocating for birth control and abortion rights, promoting equal access to political and economic opportunities, and safeguarding the well-being of women and children.

Despite the fact that the Equal Rights Amendment has yet to be ratified, second wave feminism achieved numerous successes. One such milestone was the approval of the contraceptive pill by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960, which granted women greater autonomy over their reproductive rights. Within a span of five years, approximately 6 million women were utilizing the contraceptive pill, symbolizing a significant stride towards reproductive freedom and control. Feminists have also made significant contributions in securing various rights for women, such as the ability to hold credit cards and apply for mortgages independently. They actively campaigned for the criminalization of marital rape and played a crucial role in raising awareness about domestic violence. Additionally, feminists have been instrumental in establishing gender and women's studies departments at educational institutions. The enactment of pivotal legislations like the Equal Pay Act in 1963, Title IX in 1972, and the landmark Roe v. Wade case in 1973 can be attributed to the successes achieved by feminists.

1.3.3. Impact on Feminist Literature

Chapter One: Literature Review

Feminist literature comprises a dynamic and diverse field that examines how literature can reinforce and reflect societal norms, gender roles, and power relations. This field comprises a broad range of literary works that champion women's rights and challenge the exclusion of women's voices from the literary canon. By foregrounding women's stories and perspectives, feminist literature provides a platform for marginalized voices and critiques dominant narratives that prioritize male experiences. This approach to literature has led to a more diverse and inclusive literary landscape that explores a broad range of female identities, experiences, and viewpoints.

It provides sharp and insightful critiques of patriarchal systems and power hierarchies, revealing how gender inequality functions within society. Exploring themes such as sexism, misogyny, gender norms, and systemic oppression, feminist writers analyze the social, political, and economic mechanisms that sustain gender-based discrimination and marginalization. By bringing attention to these issues, feminist literature prompts readers to interrogate and confront established power dynamics, urging them to strive for gender justice and equality.

As outlined in the Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory, feminist literature encompasses any written material that aligns with feminist principles, advocating for the political, social, economic, and cultural equality of women. This definition underscores the significance of acknowledging and appreciating the creative output of women writers, while also challenging conventional gender norms and stereotypes. Feminist literature has played a crucial role in broadening the literary landscape, incorporating works that delve into women's lived experiences and viewpoints. It addresses a diverse array of topics, spanning from sexuality and reproductive rights to issues such as domestic violence and workplace inequality. In addition, feminist literature has challenged the traditional literary canon, which has historically been dominated by male writers. Feminist authors have played a vital role in introducing fresh perspectives and themes into the literary canon. The feminist literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s has been instrumental in shedding light on the works of brilliant writers like Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, who were previously undervalued or disregarded by literary critics. Their contributions paved the way for a reevaluation of women's writing and led to a greater recognition of the importance of women's experiences and perspectives in literature. As a result, the literary canon

has expanded to include a richer and more diverse range of voices, bringing forth a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender and society.

Indeed, feminist literary theory has wielded considerable influence on the analysis and interpretation of literature. Through the lens of feminist criticism, scholars have scrutinized how literary texts either perpetuate or subvert gender norms and stereotypes, while also delving into the broader social and political implications embedded within literary works. This critical inquiry into feminist literature has deepened the individual comprehension of the historical contexts from which feminist ideologies have arisen and developed. Moreover, it has underscored the crucial concept of intersectionality, emphasizing the significance of recognizing and addressing the intersecting forms of oppression experienced by women across various axes of identity. Feminist literary criticism was developed in the 20th century as a reaction to the male domination in literature. Kaplan contended that feminist literary criticism originated from a profound appreciation for women writers and a desire to showcase the oppression and marginalization of women depicted in works authored by men (37). This led to the development of several critical techniques for examining how women are portrayed and how this supports oppression (38). Moi, further characterizes feminist criticism as the theoretical practice dedicated to the fight against patriarchy and sexism (104). Similarly, today, Tyson describes feminist criticism as the examination of "the ways in which literature . . . reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (79) and that its purpose is to "increase our understanding of women's experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women's value in the world" (114).

An essential facet of feminist literary criticism, which can be both advantageous and complex, is its deeply personal and intricate nature. Kaplan underscored the proliferation of sub-categories within feminist criticism, nearly as diverse as the feminist critics themselves (54). Similarly, Moi, argued that a central aspect of feminist literary criticism lies in its inherent subjectivity, rendering objective analysis unattainable as perspectives are invariably shaped by personal viewpoints (13). Hence, it can be challenging to differentiate between assumptions or interpretations that are universally applicable and those that are merely manifestations of subjectivity (Tyson 90-91). Consequently, it is almost hard to take specific people out of the

equation. Tyson suggests that explaining the reader's mental processes is the best way to deal with this problem. Furthermore, using feminist critique to study and analyze books may help students think back on how the book has affected them personally (Kaplan 44). This approach emphasizes the importance of unique experiences and the positive effects that a variety of experiences may have on people.

In summary, feminist literature encompasses written works that advocate for the political, social, economic, and cultural equality of women. It has played a pivotal role in challenging conventional gender norms and stereotypes, broadening the literary repertoire to incorporate narratives that delve into women's experiences and viewpoints. Influenced by feminist literary theory, the analysis of literature has scrutinized how literary works either reinforce or contest gender stereotypes, while also delving into their broader social and political implications.

1.4. Background of the Novel *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar, the first and only published novel by Sylvia Plath, which was both culturally relevant and influential since its original publication, has been written by a famous poet known for her poetry. Plath had always intended to write a novel, stating in an interview with Peter Orr that she wanted to write a "long short story" because it can convey "what one finds in daily life." The story takes place in 1953 and tracks the journey of Esther Greenwood, a twenty-year-old woman, over six months of her life. It covers her internship, her time in New York City, her mental breakdown, several suicide attempts, hospital stays, and eventual recovery. Throughout these challenges, she grapples with the societal norms and expectations of the 1950s as she strives for a path deemed unconventional and frowned upon at the time. This includes her aspirations to be an intellectual, her reluctance towards traditional roles like marriage and motherhood, and her ambition to pursue poetry. In her correspondence, Plath described her novel as an "autobiographical apprentice work," drawing loosely from her own experiences during her twentieth year. This period marked a tumultuous time for Plath, as she grappled with a breakdown, attempted suicide, and underwent treatment at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, before eventually returning to college. Plath's letters and journals vividly capture the turmoil she endured during this phase of her life. She commenced work on *The Bell Jar* in 1961, shortly after the release of her debut poetry collection, *The Colossus*.

During that year, she also welcomed her daughter, Frieda Rebecca, into the world but suffered a miscarriage. Plath's son, Nicholas Farrar, was born in 1962, and she decided to separate from her husband, Ted Hughes, and move to London with her children. Under the Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, she wrote *The Bell Jar* quickly and without any revision. The manuscript was rejected by the Saxon Committee, which called it unsatisfactory, juvenile, and overwrought. The manuscript was sent to a British publisher, William Heinemann, by Plath. The initial edition of *The Bell Jar* was published on January 14, 1963, in England under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas." Plath possibly chose a pen name to shield individuals depicted in the novel. Hughes suggested that the book "dramatizes the decisive event of [Plath's] adult life, which was her attempted suicide and accidental survival" (2). Upon its release in England, *The Bell Jar* garnered a modest number of reviews, mostly positive. Laurence Lerner of The Listener remarked on its insightful "critiques of American society" and noted its rare ability to be both "immensely readable" and possess "an almost poetic delicacy of perception." However, Plath was disheartened by the limited critical reception.

This book started what was to be the last stage in Plath's literary career. On February 11, 1963, a few weeks after the novel appeared, Sylvia Plath committed suicide. Given that her tragic death occurred so soon after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, and given the thematic content of the book, it is often considered to be an autobiographical novel.

1.4.1. Historical and Social Context

Elaine Showalter emphasizes that "*The Bell Jar* is very much a novel about the fifties" (438). Despite its strong connection to a specific era, the novel's cultural themes possess a timeless and universal quality. Infused with wit, dark humor, and raw truth, it presents a hauntingly realistic portrayal of the conflicts, breakdown, and eventual recovery of a female artist. The initial positive reception of Plath's work was fueled not only by the tragic events of her life but also by broader cultural phenomena relevant to American readers during the 1970s and 1980s. These include the impact of the Cold War on American society, the constrained roles of women in the 1950s (and their influence on the women's movement), and the prevalent mental health issues among women in the United States. Plath, who described herself as "a political person," opens *The Bell Jar* in the summer of 1953, at the height of the Cold War:

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers. . .. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. (1)

In her book, *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath adds an element of external tension and cultural authenticity by alluding to the highly debated Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case. This couple, living in the Bronx, New York, were affiliated with the American Communist Party and were found guilty of espionage for the Soviet Union. They were accused of divulging classified details about the atomic bomb and were given the death penalty, ultimately being executed. Plath's choice to include this reference in the opening of her novel adds a layer of external conflict and captures the societal atmosphere of that era. "The Rosenbergs' case," as described in a *New York Times* opinion piece published on June 19, 2003, "continues to haunt American history, serving as a reminder to us of the injustice that can result when a nation succumbs to hysteria." This occurred during a polarizing time in the early Cold War era when the nation was embroiled in "witch hunts" seeking out Communist sympathizers.

These events were part of a wider "hysterical anti-Communism" movement, which included Senator Joseph McCarthy's congressional hearings on "un-American activities," which primarily targeted individuals in the arts, writing, and film industries suspected of having Communist affiliations. The events of Sylvia Plath's generation were profoundly significant, marking a defining moment in history. The cultural and political atmosphere of the era left a lasting impact on Plath and her peers, who were deeply influenced by the fear, suspicion, and scrutiny they faced. These circumstances fostered a heightened awareness of political and social tensions, shaping the perspectives and experiences of Plath and those around her (Nelson 24).

Esther's obsession with death is evident in her opening speech, when she compares "being burned alive all along your nerves" to the "worst thing in the world." It also foreshadows the electroshock therapy she would have in order to address the breakdown she has later. Plath also highlights the similarities between the electrocution method used to execute the Rosenbergs and

the two "shock treatments," or electroconvulsive therapy, that Esther undergoes in the book. Plath often mentions the deaths of the Rosenbergs to introduce her main ideas. Ethel Rosenberg's full name was Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg. Plath's main character is Esther Greenwood, and their similar names suggest a connection between Esther in the story and a woman many Americans thought was treated unfairly (Ashe 216). Ethel Rosenberg, who had two kids, was frequently depicted in the media as a negligent mother. Plath uses her story to highlight the intense challenges of motherhood for women in the 1950s and to show how diverging from cultural norms back then could lead to severe consequences.

In *The Bell Jar*, “Plath equates sexual and personal politics with wider historical processes and breaks silences concerning women’s feelings of alienation and barrenness, and the negative, devouring aspects of motherhood” (Blain et al. 860). When Plath wrote "*The Bell Jar*," she was immersed in the domestic ideals prevalent in the postwar United States. This became especially clear during her time at Smith College when Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee in 1955, spoke at the commencement ceremony. Stevenson praised the traditional role of the housewife, suggesting that women could contribute to important societal issues by focusing on their homes, husbands, and raising children.

Stevenson believed that during the Cold War era, a woman's most significant role in international politics was to nurture the home. In the 1950s, women interested in intellectual or artistic pursuits faced challenges. Pursuing such interests was seen as unfeminine, and educational institutions often focused on teaching girls’ subjects like home economics to prepare them for their roles as suburban wives. Women were rarely seen in positions of power. As Adrienne Rich recalls of her college days at Radcliffe, “I never saw a single woman on a lecture platform, or in front of a class. ...Women students were simply not taken seriously” (238). When diving into *The Bell Jar*, it's crucial to keep in mind that in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, feminism wasn't widely embraced. Despite the relative prosperity of these decades, a woman's societal status and financial security were often tied to her husband's job and earnings, rather than her own abilities or achievements.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Six million women performed tasks that had traditionally been performed by males during World War II out of a sense of patriotism, and images of strong, capable women like Rosie the Riveter contributing to the war effort were promoted. But a wave of antifeminism emerged after the war, erasing the notion of progressive femininity. The 1950s were a time when women voluntarily gave up the hard-won benefits they had gained during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the right to vote, independent property ownership, professional careers, higher education, and participation in the arts. Betty Friedan captures this period so well in *The Feminine Mystique*.

As Bennett states, “Plath’s *The Bell Jar* is a book about women. More specifically, it is a book about growing up as a woman in a culture that is fundamentally unfair and hypocritical in its inequality” (103).*The Bell Jar* vividly captures the struggle of a woman trying to assert herself in a society where options were limited. In the 1950s, women had few paths they could take in life. Esther's battle between motherhood and a career is central to her story, with motherhood being the favored societal option. During this time in America, women were expected to be sexually submissive, controlled by men, and devoted to being nurturing mothers. “A woman who failed to marry was not simply doomed to a life of dissatisfaction or frustration. Without a husband and children, she would become little short of a freak” (Bennett 102). The mental health of women suffered as a result of this lack of choice. A central subject of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is the deterioration of suburban housewives' mental health. analyzing a sample of twenty-eight women from wealthy communities, Friedan found that sixteen of the twenty-eight “were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquilizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized” (240-41).

As Esther is increasingly immersed in New York culture, the sense of unease grows daily. Her sense of confusion and uncertainty increases due to the diverse combination she encounters in this culture. She is caught between two worlds: the traditional world of her family, which is too easy for her to live, and the world symbolized by New York and its way of life, which demands more of her than she can provide. Society sets specific expectations for young women like Esther, dictating what they should look like and what they should be interested in. These standards often revolve around skills like cooking, sewing, and shorthand, not necessarily for personal growth but

to attract men. Society ingrains the idea that apart from secretarial jobs, women have no other purpose than to wait for marriage and motherhood, which doesn't align with Esther's own desires and ambitions.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath delves into the societal expectations and attitudes toward women in the 1950s. Both Esther and Plath herself shared a deep love for writing and aspirations of pursuing it as a career. However, societal norms deemed such a path as impractical and unfeminine for women. This societal perspective leaves the female role ambiguous and limits women's ability to make fulfilling life choices.

1.4.2. Critical Reception and Controversies

The response to Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* has stirred debates because of its depiction of female identity, power dynamics, and writing style. Scholars have delved into how the book explores themes like victimization, power structures, and the impact of institutions on both intellectual and non-intellectual women. Plath's distinctive writing style, often overlooked, is examined for its natural flow and political messages, particularly within *The Bell Jar*. Additionally, Plath's journey from being critiqued in literary circles to being celebrated in popular magazines has sparked discussions about the depth of her literary contributions and the sensationalism surrounding her personal struggles. The reception of *The Bell Jar* reveals a nuanced interplay of themes, controversies, and critical analyses that continue to shape conversations about Plath's work. *The Bell Jar* obtains many receptions from public; readers, market, and industrials. It is one of hundred best novels in the whole time. There are many who have read *The Bell Jar* and absolutely love it. Robert Scholes praised the novel is “sharp and uncanny descriptions”, he also said “The brittle humor of that early generation is reincarnated in *The Bell Jar*, but raised to a more serious level because it’s recognized as a resource of hysteria”, *The Bell Jar* is proper as one of the best novels which has written as stated by Ahmad Tohari (the author of Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk) in the cover of *The Bell Jar* Indonesian Version. However, Linda W. Wagner criticized in her writing of Women Studies Vol 12, 1986, “Plath’s *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman”, she States that:

> *The Bell Jar* must certainly be read as the story of the inevitable clash, a dulled and dulling repetition of lives all too familiar to contemporary readers, and a testimony to the repressive cultural mold that trapped many midcentury women, forcing them outside what should have been their rightful productive lives. (vol.12)

The way people perceive and understand Sylvia Plath's body of work has been influenced by the controversies surrounding her life and death. Plath's suicide at the age of thirty in February 1963, just a month after her only novel *The Bell Jar* was published, has cast a shadow over her literary legacy (Matović11). It has taken decades for scholars to delve deeper into the various dimensions of Sylvia Plath's work. However, even today, literary criticism often remains focused on the relationship between Plath's personal life and her writing, rather than exploring the full range of her literary talent (Kroll 1). However, despite the overuse of her personal biography, Plath's narrative battle with her inner self has seldom been critically examined in relation to the larger ideological framework of gender normativity. The tragic culmination of Plath's dramatic life is her tragic suicide, which seems to have become the center of attention for many critics and sets a standard of evaluation. Plath's actual suicide and real breakdown are seen as apparent acts that lend credibility to her later poetry and novel and demonstrate her seriousness.

The main reasons for disagreement about *The Bell Jar's* literary value are its widespread bestseller success and its association with the scandals of Sylvia Plath's life, which served as the inspiration for most of her literature. *The Bell Jar's* storyline is organized as a narrated account of Plath's attempted suicide at age twenty, together with the occasions leading up to and after it. *The Bell Jar* belongs to the long-established tradition of the bildungsroman (Wagner 55), however, inside a distinctive framework that is structured as a quasi-mythological story that traces the steps of a rite of passage that the protagonist of the book and Plath's alter ego must do. Greenwood, Esther (Matović42). Plath used this fictionalized reworking of autobiography as a coping mechanism for her complicated, extremely painful history, which was influenced by a number of troubling societal factors. Plath's complex identity, the ideological framework of the time, and the necessity of fiction to portray the realities of the underrepresented are all factors in how this book should be interpreted.

It is worth highlighting those autobiographies written by women often receive less attention from critics if they deviate from the established literary canon. Even when they are acknowledged, female autobiographies are often placed on the periphery of literary discourse. The study "A Poetics of Women's Autobiography" by Sidonie Smith can provide valuable insights into interpreting *The Bell Jar* as an autofiction novel. Furthermore, the concepts put forth by Adrienne Rich regarding re-vision and Joan W. Scott's notion of gender as a category for historical analysis can be applied to examine how Sylvia Plath reimagined her own past through narrative. This exploration reveals the constraints imposed by patriarchal society on a female writer during the mid-twentieth century. Placed within the broader context of critical discourse on the intersection of history and fiction, *The Bell Jar* will also be examined regarding its ability to transform and reinterpret autobiographical events. By focusing on the protagonist's inability to find a satisfying resolution, the novel highlights the influence of underlying normative systems that dictate a singular, predetermined narrative of an individual's past.

Literary critics often fall into the same trap as historians by assuming that narratives about the past are inherently shaped and fixed. In the case of *The Bell Jar*, many critics tend to emphasize the autobiographical parallels, even equating the novel with Sylvia Plath's personal history. This approach suggests a direct translation of reality into fiction, overlooking the complexities and artistic liberties inherent in the novel, however, Elizabeth Hardwick characterizes the novel:

> This autobiographical work is written in a bare, rather collegiate 1950`s style, yet the attitude, the distance and bitter carelessness are colored by a deep mood of affect lessness. The pleasures and sentiments of youth-wanting to be invited to the Yale prom, losing your virginity -- are rather unreal. (Hardwick4)

The prevailing assessment of Sylvia Plath's work often characterizes it as schizoid, seen both as a personal condition and a reflection of broader cultural themes. David Holbrook argues that “there is a schizoid condition in Plath’s life and work: but this cannot be discussed without reference to the problem which the schizoid individual is singularly equipped to recognize – the problem today of living in schizoid society” (Holbrook7). Holbrook argues that Sylvia Plath devised flawed solutions to this dilemma, suggesting that her approaches should not be seen as

models to follow:" Sylvia Plath does not speak for all women, unless we are to suppose all women schizoid" (Holbrook154).

1.4.3. *The Bell Jar*`s Significance, Style, Narrative Technique

This book is like a giant in American lit from the 20th century, you know? It really dives deep into all those big issues America was dealing with during the Cold War. It's like a snapshot of the times, showing all the political drama, social changes, and even the mental struggles folks were going through. It presents brilliantly "the oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s and the soul-destroying effect this atmosphere could have on ambitious, high-minded young woman like Plath" (Bonds 49). It views the world through Plath's own eyes and exposes her thoughts and feeling; her fear, disgust, delight, and shock. It is a sign that *The Bell Jar* has been an essential cultural artifact of its age, exposing it to writers' experiences and feelings on life. In his evaluation of the text, Frederick Jameson emphasizes that "there is nothing that is not social and historical" in the text "that everything is in the last analysis political" (5). Understanding the importance of the text and deciphering its meaning is essential to appreciating Plath's political writing style. It is a novel "that has become an exemplary work for Plath's generation and is an intensely political novel"; it became obvious that Plath is a master of cultural critique (Kumlu 134-135). The novel explores a society that undermines the female protagonist. It delves into the heroine's journey to assert her autonomy and strength amidst challenging societal pressures.

Throughout generations, critics have offered various interpretations of the novel, often examining it through a psychological lens, perceiving it as a narrative encapsulating the intricacies of human emotion. In her Journals, Plath provides insight into her mental state, expressing:

> My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic selflove, is jealousy. I am jealous of men . . . it is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life. I can pretend to forget my envy; no matter, it is there, insidious, malignant, latent(Plath,*The Unabridged Journals*).

Therefore, Sylvia Plath's emphasis in *The Bell Jar* lies not solely on mental illness but rather on the interplay between Esther's individual preoccupation and the broader societal context; Esther serves as Plath's alter ego. Throughout her life, Plath grappled with a quest for happiness that eluded her grasp. She confronted the limited options available to her: marriage or career. To accept the idea of marriage, she said, “I could hold my nose, close my eyes, and jump blindly into the waters of some man’s inside,” then “One fine day I would float to the surface, quite drowned, and supremely happy with my new found selflessness.” Her alternative option was to find a "Cause," yet ironically, she envisioned herself mirroring these women in their fixation on establishing clubs and organizations. for “they got to feel emancipated and self-important [sic] somehow” (Plath 98-100). However, the author captures some of the fundamental themes of growing up, like isolation, the quest for identity, and slow self-discovery.

Certainly, Plath’s “dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject” (Perloff511). Although Plath's book is about her family and her life, it also suggests that her culture had much greater social and political implications. The mentality that the Cold War placed on American society is paralleled in the novel. It demonstrates that confinement was most likely the only viable means of survival. It is true that containment was more of a domestic than a political issue. Understanding society's conception of an ideal feminine image is crucial to understanding Plath/Esther reaction as it thoroughly shaped the lives of both the author and her character. In fact, an echo to the Victorian notion of the perfect ideal woman appeared again during the 1950s; a powerful image of the supportive and loyal housewife who was vicarious and selfless devoted completely to her husband and her children. As a result, women were captivated at home and lost their political and social voice.

1.5. Gender Expectation in the 1950s

After World War II, America experienced economic prosperity and social stability in the 1950s, known for its traditional family values and gender roles. Men and women were expected to follow societal norms, dictating their behavior, ambitions, and place in public and private spheres.

During the 1950s, for women, embracing the role of homemaker wasn't merely adopting a position but rather assimilating into an identity meticulously crafted by society. Following the post-war era, there emerged a significant societal push for women to relinquish the jobs they had assumed during the war and return to the domestic sphere to tend to their families. Media and advertising of the period consistently portrayed the ideal woman as an impeccable housewife and mother, skilled in household duties and dedicated to fostering a serene domestic environment to support her husband's career. This idealized portrayal of domestic life was reinforced through television programs, magazines, and even educational institutions. Women were bombarded with messages insinuating that their most significant achievements and contributions to society would stem from their roles within the home.

Marriage and motherhood were held in the highest regard, with unmarried or childless women often regarded with suspicion or sympathy. It was customary for women to pursue school with the expectation that they would eventually find a good spouse as opposed to pursuing independent careers. When women did work, positions like secretaries, teachers, or nurses were usually assigned to them. These jobs were seen to be continuations of the caring and supporting roles that women performed in the home. Nevertheless, despite some women's desire or necessity to continue working, these positions sometimes paid less than those of males and were viewed as stopgap measures until marriage.

On the other hand, males were portrayed as the breadwinners, taking on all the duties that came with being the defenders and providers of their families. One's capacity to support a decent lifestyle and find employment were considered the cornerstones of a man's manhood. Men were expected to be strong-willed, ambitious, and authoritative in both the home and the business. Men could hardly adopt positions or actions that society considered feminine without having their manhood called into question. Men who were involved in household chores or showed signs of emotional sensitivity were scrutinized since these traits went against the popular conceptions of what it meant to be a man. Cultural influences from television, publications, and commercials depicting idealized views of gender roles and family life helped to reinforce the expectations of the 1950s society. The idea that men and women have different spheres of influence was reinforced by popular media's frequent portrayals of men as successful providers and women as committed homemakers. Perceptions of gender roles were greatly influenced by advertisements

and media portrayals, which promoted the image of the nuclear family with distinct duties for men and women.

There were growing challenges to the rigid gender standards that were enforced during the 1950s. Certain women started to scrutinize and contest conventional norms, pursuing chances beyond the household and joining the workforce. Women's roles changed after World War II as they fought against the idea that their only duties were that of husbands and mothers and aspired to more autonomy and independence. These modifications signaled the start of a slow transition in American society toward gender roles that are more inclusive and varied. In the end, the 1950s' rigid gender norms aided in the women's liberation movement's rise throughout the next few decades. Women started to call for respect, equal rights, and possibilities outside of the home. The 1950s' tight gender rules set the stage for today's more inclusive discourse on gender equality and the deconstruction of harmful gender stereotypes.

1.6. *The Bell Jar* as Metaphor for Female Oppression

Literary works often depict male dominance as a symbol of oppression, particularly towards female characters. This often reinforces real-world power structures and gender inequalities. In the 1950s, women faced societal norms that limited autonomy and self-fulfillment, with traditional gender roles emphasized. In the 1960s, women revolted against male dominance, leading to the feminist revolt in *The Bell Jar*. This highlights the need for a better understanding of female oppression, including male dominance, double sexual standards, and social injustices that affect women's psychological space.

Regarding society's limitations, stereotypical gender roles and oppression of women are obvious themes in *The Bell Jar* and women's subordinate gender role in the novel is evident in Mrs. Willard's reflections: “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (Plath 74). Esther does not want to be “the place an arrow shoots off from” but to “shoot off in all directions” herself (87); hence she does not want to live a restricted life due to her gender and refuses to settle for a life as a wife and mother and nothing more.

Many scholars have linked the concept of madness to women due to male dominance, as a result of their behavior deviating from male rules, which are seen as crazy behavior, through their

challenge and rejection of societal expectations. Esther's refusal to adhere to the limited gender roles dictated by the patriarchal society in *The Bell Jar* positions her behavior as deviant, leading to her classification as "mad" and consequently marking her as an embodiment of "otherness." This notion of "otherness" draws upon the concept elucidated by Michel Foucault in his work "Madness and Civilization," where individuals are marginalized and estranged from societal norms and expectations. Therefore, in *The Bell Jar*, the designation of "otherness" serves as a tool of control and oppression over women, as those who deviate from patriarchal norms are branded as "mad." The novel delves into the challenges faced by women and the repercussions of failing to conform to societal expectations. These themes are further explored in the book "Sylvia Plath's Fiction.": A Critical Study, where Luke Ferretter claims that “To be a woman, in Plath’s culture, was to be on the verge of mental illness, to be mentally healthy was to be ‘feminine’, to act as a woman should” (130-131). He posits a correlation between femininity and mental illness, highlighting how Esther grapples with navigating a society that either induces mental distress as she attempts to conform or stigmatizes her as "mad" if she refuses to adhere to societal norms.

Patriarchy's oppression of women is emphasized by Simone de Beauvoir in her theoretical work *The Second Sex*; furthermore, Betty Friedan highlights women's limited role in the American patriarchal society in the 1950s in her feminist work *The Feminine Mystique*. *The Bell Jar's* patriarchal society clearly views women as the subordinate sex, and Esther's mental health issues are a result of these restrictions. Friedan said that women were under pressure to conform to patriarchal norms of femininity. Sexual/Textual Politics by Toril Moi is another feminist literary work that highlights the ideals of patriarchal civilizations. According to Moi, patriarchy labels women as the inferior sex.

Additionally, Kate Millet contends in her book *Sexual Politics* that society creates gender distinctions by requiring the two sexes to behave in accordance with social norms and expectations, which are exclusive to women. *The Bell Jar's* portrayal of Esther as a victim of patriarchal norms makes these feminist writings relevant to her battle against female subjugation and limitations. Previous analyses of *The Bell Jar* have explored various themes, including the correlation between societal expectations of women and suicide, the construction of female identity within a patriarchal framework, and Esther's confrontation with the patriarchal norms, which intersects with her experience of mental instability. Esther grapples with gender

constraints, which contribute to her psychological distress, arguably stemming from societal pressures. Jonna Vikman highlights this in her article on femininity in *The Bell Jar*, arguing that women are depicted as objects in the book, implying that they are victims of “The patriarchal societies of the 20th century where gender and norms posited women as inferior”.

Thus, she claims that Esther's “state of mind is the product of the pressure set by the surroundings” (6). Furthermore, Sandra Meneses makes the case that societal pressures placed on women might contribute to mental illness in her essay *The Bell Jar*, which addresses suicide: “The representations of women who commit suicide do so often according to the gendered expectations of them in society” (2). When Esther considers the idea of marrying her boyfriend Buddy, she experiences a sense of uneasiness and fear, as highlighted in Frida Möller's essay "Inventing Madness." Möller asserts that Esther is aware marrying Buddy would result in the loss of her independence, triggering her anxiety and making her feel trapped, as though she is being confined in a suffocating, dark space without any means of escape (6). Additionally, Möller asserts that Esther is "labelled insane" because she defies society's expectations of what it means to be a woman (29).

In her article exploring oppression through Sylvia Plath's life and narratives, she delves into the portrayal of patriarchal society within *The Bell Jar*, Sandra L. Meyer argues” Sylvia Plath creates the character of Esther Greenwood as a way to deal with the emotions she wrestled with” and” Sylvia Plath also knew first-hand the suffering of being a woman in a patriarchal society” (1). She also asserts that *The Bell Jar* and Plath's private journals share a common theme of the agonizing sentiments associated with being born as a woman, which implies having little opportunities.

The piece by de Villiers discusses women's aspirations and restricted prospects in *The Bell Jar*, where she declares that Esther is “expected to choose between normative ideals of the feminine and her creativity and it is her awareness that these choices are mutually exclusive that drives her to madness” (9). Esther finds herself constrained by the expectations of a patriarchal society, where she is pressured to conform to traditional feminine roles despite her desire to pursue creativity, particularly writing, which is not considered suitable for women. These societal limitations and gendered expectations become significant contributors to her mental anguish. Consequently, earlier examinations of feminism and madness in *The Bell Jar* argue that Esther's

mental illness stems from the patriarchal society's narrow definition of femininity. It is posited that Esther's refusal to adhere to these prescribed gender roles is intricately linked to her descent into madness, a viewpoint echoed in this essay. This article, in contrast to previous research, will contend that her rejection of femininity is not the primary cause of her insanity. She needs to reject femininity because she wants to do more with her life than just live up to patriarchal society's expectations of what it means to be a woman. More importantly, though, is that she wants to write and be free to pursue her interests, and the only way she can do that is by being perceived as insane by society. In order to achieve her creative goals, Esther decides to go insane. This article argues that her insane behavior is an intentional decision and a route to artistic liberation, in contrast to previous studies that saw it as an uncontrolled result of her rejection of gender.

1.7. Significance of Exploring the Female Position in the Novel

In the 1950s, there were a lot of contradicting demands placed on women. While education is important, a woman's primary priorities should be finding a husband and raising a family. As one college student, who Friedan interviewed, said: “You’re a social outcast at home if you don’t [go to college] /…/ [however] everybody wants to graduate with a diamond ring on her finger That’s the important thing” (145). Since a really feminine woman would not desire a higher education, a woman who chose to pursue her job was viewed as "neurotic and unfeminine" (Friedan 11–12).

As a result, many women experienced conflicting feelings about their identity and destiny, much like Sylvia Plath's character Esther in her book *The Bell Jar*. She lives in a culture that expects her to live the conventional life of a suburban housewife, despite her desire to become a well-known poet. Being a mother and having a great profession at the same time were viewed as total opposites that could not coexist. Esther believes that in order to choose one, she must give up on the other. This causes an internal conflict that finally loses her and makes her consider suicide. Her closest friends and family attempt to steer her toward marriage, but she believes that she is capable of more than just becoming a wife and mother. According to records, a lot of women went through an identity crisis in the 1950s, but physicians thought it was because they were going against their biological makeup (Friedan 73). Their alleviation from suffering was contingent upon education, typically in the form of courses tailored for college girls focusing on

marriage, prenatal maternity groups, parent education, or similar subjects aimed at guiding them into their expected roles as women (Friedan 116). Women's magazines and other media heavily promoted this kind of "education," which was made available in high schools as well as universities. This pushed younger American ladies to get married young (Friedan 12).

Exploring the female position in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* aims to illuminates the societal norms and expectations faced by the protagonist Esther. She is deeply affected by the societal norms of the 20th century, and is a victim of *The Feminine Mystique*. While she constantly expresses disdain for existing societal norms and imagines herself pursuing a career as a poet, Esther likes to toy with the idea of how her life could turn out if she chose one or the other path. She uses a fig tree as an analogy to illustrate her conflicting emotions and thoughts.

Two prominent female characters in *The Bell Jar*, Mrs. Greenwood, who is Esther's mother, and Mrs. Willard, who is Buddy's mother, both explicitly and implicitly remind Esther of her proper place in society. Mrs. Greenwood is always pushing her daughter to pick up shorthand so she can do what she does, which is essentially translate exciting letters for other people, mostly guys. Mrs. Willard teaches her son and Esther that “what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (Plath 74). These two ladies also support the notion that women should abstain from sexual activity and those men should not respect them if they were impure. Their beliefs trouble Esther because she does not want to copy men's exciting letters or serve them; she also does not want to remain pure for a man who does not reciprocate her feelings.

These instances illustrate the common perception that most women held throughout those two times, and the girls in question lacked many female role models who espoused the notion that women should be in charge of their own lives rather than be subservient to men. Nonetheless, it makes sense that there aren't more feminist role models given how strongly male views on what women should and shouldn't be, as well as the stigma women faced for defying accepted social standards, shaped the 19th and 20th centuries. In such a milieu, conforming to the established norms is simpler than challenging them, as it essentially entails scrutinizing and disrupting one's own life experiences.

Plath's portrayal of the female experience in *The Bell Jar* is deeply rooted in its historical context, illuminating the oppressive dynamics of patriarchal society and their toll on women's

mental well-being. The novel elucidates how societal norms and expectations can engender feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression among women, who must navigate a labyrinth of often conflicting societal demands. Additionally, it delves into the intersection of gender and mental health, as Esther's psychological state deteriorates over the course of the narrative. Plath's own struggles with mental illness, coupled with her acute awareness of the pressures imposed on women by society, underpin the novel's exploration of these themes. As readers engage with Esther's internal conflicts and outside obstacles in *The Bell Jar*, they are invited to consider their own ideas about strength, autonomy, and femininity. Plath simultaneously promotes women's rejection of traditional norms and their pursuit of increased autonomy and self-determination throughout the whole book. She also emphasizes the dangers of cultural restrictions on women, as seen by Esther's repeated attempts at suicide as a result of the oppressive expectations placed on her. Plath highlights that if these limitations are kept in place, as was the case with Esther, it may eventually result in mental instability.

Plath's contribution to feminist literature has solidified her work as a seminal text, sparking profound critical analysis and discourse on women's experiences, challenges, and resilience. Esther's narrative serves as a catalyst, compelling readers to confront systemic injustices and champion societal transformation.

1.8. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath offers a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of the female experience in mid-20th century America. Through the semi-autobiographical lens of protagonist Esther Greenwood, Plath delves deep into the challenges faced by women during a time of societal expectations and limited opportunities. The novel bravely confronts the confining nature of traditional gender roles and the toll it takes on women's mental health and well-being. By shedding light on Esther's emotional turmoil, Plath effectively critiques the patriarchal society that perpetuates these constraints and emphasizes the vital need for women's autonomy and self-expression. *The Bell Jar* stands as a powerful testament to the enduring quest for genuine identity and the urgent call for societal change.

Chapter Two: Esther`s Aspirations Against Social Expectations in *The Bell Jar*

2.1. Introduction

The Bell Jar, one of Sylvia Plath's foundational works, offers a comprehensive examination of the ways in which marriage, sexuality, patriarchy, and identity crises connect with society. The novel dives deeply into the repressive forces of patriarchal authority, which shape and constrain the experiences of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, against the backdrop of mid-20th-century America. Through Esther's journey, Plath illuminates the complex and often fraught dynamics between gender roles, sexual expectations, and the quest for selfhood within a society that imposes rigid norms and ideals. As Esther navigates the turbulent waters of adulthood, her encounters with societal pressures, intimate relationships, and personal aspirations converge to unravel a poignant narrative that resonates with readers across generations. In this essay, we will delve into the nuanced exploration of patriarchy, sexuality, marriage, and identity crisis in *The Bell Jar*, uncovering the profound insights that Plath offers into the human condition and the quest for autonomy in the face of systemic oppression.

2.2. Feminist Literary Theory as Concept in *The Bell Jar*

Feminist literary theory is a significant lens through which Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* can be analyzed and understood. The novel, published in 1963, is often regarded as a seminal work of feminist literature, as it explores the struggles and oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society.

At the heart of *The Bell Jar* is the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, a young woman navigating the challenges of finding her identity and purpose in a world that imposes restrictive gender roles and expectations. Through Esther’s experiences and inner monologue, Plath sheds light on the societal pressures and constraints placed on women, particularly in the realm of sexuality, mental health, and self-expression.

Feminist literary theory examines how literature reflects and challenges patriarchal structures and gender inequalities. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath’s portrayal of Esther’s descent into mental illness can be interpreted as a metaphor for the suffocating effects of patriarchal society on women’s autonomy and self-actualization. The titular “bell jar” symbolizes the oppressive force that traps Esther and limits her ability to thrive and express her true self.

Furthermore, the novel explores the objectification and commodification of women's bodies, as exemplified by Esther's internship experience at a prestigious magazine, where she is expected to conform to societal beauty standards and play a decorative role. Feminist literary theory highlights how such objectification and the denial of agency contribute to the marginalization and oppression of women.

Plath's depiction of Esther's struggles with mental health and her experiences with electroshock therapy also resonate with feminist critiques of the medicalization and pathologizing of women's experiences. The novel challenges the notion that women's dissatisfaction with their prescribed roles is a personal failing rather than a consequence of systemic oppression.

Overall, *The Bell Jar* is a powerful exploration of the challenges and constraints faced by women in a patriarchal society, and feminist literary theory provides a valuable framework for understanding and analyzing the novel's themes, symbolism, and Plath's critique of gender inequalities.

2.3. Female Sexuality in *The Bell Jar*

Sexuality permeates the novel as a central theme. Despite Esther having dated a few boys, she recognizes the societal expectation for her to remain a virgin until she finds an appropriate husband. She anticipates a similar stance from her boyfriend, Buddy Willard. Buddy is a brilliant and charming man who is meticulously preparing his future as a doctor. He is the ideal match for Esther and "he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for" (Plath 71). Buddy perceives women as inferior and automatically assumes they maintain their virginity until marriage, conforming to their husband's desires. Esther first confronts his blatant superiority when Buddy exposes himself to her. As Esther puts it, "The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed" (71).

Esther`s realization that her boyfriend was not as ideal as she originally thought. Her initial surprise then turned to anger when she discovered that he had been unfaithful. At the time, according to societal norms in America, engaging in premarital sex was considered taboo., but apparently only for women as Esther realizes:

> Back at college I started asking a senior here and a senior there what they would do if a boy they knew suddenly told them he'd slept thirty times with some slutty waitress one summer, smack in the middle of knowing them. But these seniors said most boys were like that and you couldn't honestly accuse them of anything until you were at least pinned or engaged to be married. (73)

Esther's anger doesn't stem from the affair itself but rather from Buddy's hypocritical treatment of women. He feigns virginity to appease his mother's expectations, displaying a double standard in his behavior towards women because she was "a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both" (Plath 74). Buddy portrays himself as naive and inexperienced with sexual matters. He gives Esther the impression that she is more worldly than him in that regard. As a result, Esther feels deeply deceived when she finds out that Buddy had a sexual relationship with a waitress over the summer. Buddy's hypocritical nature is further exposed when he blames the waitress, accusing her of being the seducer, rather than taking responsibility for his own actions.

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Esther's mother is also preoccupied with controlling her daughter's sexuality. To dissuade Esther from any spontaneous sexual behavior before marriage to a suitable man, she sends her an article titled "In Defense of Chastity" written by a married woman. This article explicitly outlines the reasons why a woman should remain pure and virginal until her husband can initiate and educate her about sex (85). Esther recognizes the irrational double standard inherent in these attitudes about female sexuality - it relegates women to an inferior position where they must remain passive, while ceding control over their sex lives entirely to their future husbands.

Whenever Esther depicts acts of violence, she links them to sexuality and gender dynamics, even equating violence with rape - implying men's ability to exert power over women. At one point, Esther encounters Marco, described as "a woman-hater", who physically assaults her and nearly sexually assaults her as well. On another occasion, Esther witnesses a woman in labor giving birth, and when the male doctor makes an episiotomy cut to the perineum area,

Esther seems to connect this medical procedure to the broader theme of violence and male domination over the female body. The narration repeatedly draws parallels between overt violence and the sexual objectification or possession of women by men, Esther says that she "heard scissors close on woman's skin like cloth and the blood began to run down" (69). Women are compared to things and are treated accordingly.

Losing virginity becomes a very important issue for Esther, "I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line" (86). Esther believes that losing her virginity before marriage will help to level the playing field, challenging the double standards and societal rules imposed on women. She seeks to defy not only Buddy but also the expectations set by her own mother and Buddy's mother, both of whom stress the significance of purity. Esther's rebellion extends beyond just Buddy; she holds both mothers accountable for their submissive attitudes, which she rejects and refuses to conform to. Yet, Esther's decision to have sexual intercourse and thus get rid of her virginity or as she calls it, "a millstone around my neck" (240) is complicated by her fear of getting pregnant. According to Esther, the woman can never be free and equal to the man, if she has to worry about pregnancy, "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" (233).

Esther struggles with her inner feelings and superficial appearance, despite pretending to be engaged to Buddy Willard. Her hypocrisy and depression lead to a nervous breakdown and a failed suicide attempt. During her recovery, Dr. Nolan, a female doctor, helps Esther find a doctor who prescribes contraception and encourages her to be her true self. As a final step on her way to self-awareness, Esther decides to lose her virginity with a random, yet intelligent man: "I wanted somebody I didn't know and wouldn't go on knowing – a kind of impersonal, priestlike official as in the tales of tribal rites" (241).

Esther perceives the loss of her virginity as a rite of passage into womanhood. In this symbolic ceremony, her university teacher, Irwin, assumes the role of the officiant, guiding her into this new phase of life, only to be discarded once the ritual is complete. However, following their intercourse, Esther experiences heavy bleeding, necessitating an urgent medical intervention. Saved and relieved, Esther thinks that "there ought . . . I thought, to be a ritual for

being born twice" (57). She went through a purifying journey since Esther's purity is now a state of mind rather than her virginity.

2.4. Family and Marriage in the 1950s America

In postwar America, especially during the Cold War era and the McCarthyism period, domestic life was viewed as a sanctuary where families could find refuge from external threats. Following the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, there was a widespread longing for a return to a sense of "normalcy." Additionally, any behavior considered deviant was met with suspicion, fueled by the prevailing fear of Communism.

Numerous women, both voluntarily and involuntarily, were compelled to exit their employment due to the influx of World War II veterans. This not only resulted in the loss of their hard-earned incomes, which had afforded them independence, but also dealt a blow to their self-confidence. Once more, women found themselves restricted to domestic roles.

The average age at which women entered the dating scene and marriage declined, paralleled by a decrease in the proportion of women attending college. Betty Friedan noted that "60 per cent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar"(6). Women might pursue higher education, but whether they completed their studies became inconsequential as marriage often took precedence, rendering further education unnecessary. Those women who prioritized their careers were often stigmatized as unattractive, unmarried, and childless, implying they had failed to achieve the traditional ideal of family life. In contrast, the role of the housewife was idealized and celebrated as the epitome of femininity. Women's magazines promoted domesticity by offering guidance on childcare, preparing meals for industrious husbands, and managing household chores like laundry. Advertisements within these publications often featured images of modern appliances such as washing machines, dishwashers, and vacuum cleaners. The 1950s marked a period of economic prosperity and heightened consumerism in the United States, making the suburban housewife a prime target for advertisers. Friedan observed that "the suburban housewife – she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world" (7).

Amidst the rapid growth of businesses, most middle-class white men occupied well-paid, white-collar jobs, devoting their days to work. Consequently, traditional gender roles became

sharply delineated: men as breadwinners and women as homemakers and caregivers. The 1950s were characterized not only by economic prosperity and consumerism but also by a significant baby boom. It was commonly held that families were replenishing lost numbers due to children who couldn't be born during the war. However, as Doepke argues in his article, “the Baby Boom of the 1950s was fueled by the crowding out of younger women from the labor force by older women who had gained work experience during the war “(Doepke). Thus, younger women favored getting married and starting a family since they had less opportunities to obtain employment.

It was an artificial image of a happily married woman, and she didn't have any choice but to comply with societal demands. She had been assigned the role of a housewife, and she had been convinced that her role was as important as her husband's, given that she had no job or career prospects and had been encouraged by the media, politicians and family experts to find a suitable husband and marry in order to save the country. Yet, daily domestic task routines have been found to be the cause of alcoholism, melancholy, chronic fatigue, and even suicides.

It seems that managing the family and bringing up the kids cannot take the place of the actual job that is done outside the home. Women said they were denied meaningful involvement in public affairs and that they were unable to completely express their strengths and creativity. Despite gaining unrestricted access to education in earlier decades and a rise in the proportion of female college students, educated women were unable to reach their full potential. As Edith M. Stern, an American journalist, wrote in her essay: “For a woman to get a rewarding sense of total creation by way of the multiple monotonous chores that are her daily lot would be as irrational as for an assembly line worker to rejoice that he had created an automobile” (73).

The woman in the 1950s had little option since, as has previously been established, she was expected to marry in order to follow social conventions. Many activists, particularly the younger and more radical feminists, attacked marriage during the second wave of feminism, accusing it of being a patriarchal institution that rendered women reliant and subservient. In 1970, Pat Mainardi, a Redstockings' radical feminist group member, authored an article titled "The Politics of Housework," advocating for the equal sharing of household chores, including childcare, between men and women (Dicker 89). Household tasks have long been deemed "insignificant," yet they profoundly shape women's lives. The responsibilities of chores and

childcare heavily influence their choices and decisions. Silvia Federici, an Italian feminist, sparked conversation in the U.S.A. with her campaign "Wages for Housework," which advocated for potential compensation for domestic labor.

The availability of the Pill allowed women to pursue professional professions. They could finish their education and put off having children since they didn't have to worry about being interrupted by an undesired pregnancy.

2.4.1. Marriage and the Female Exploitation

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* sheds light on the exploitation of women within the confines of marriage. While this institution is portrayed as protective for women, it's actually a construct that serves male interests. Men often assert that marriage is designed to safeguard women, providing them freedom from external employment. However, in reality, it primarily serves to ensure men's comfort and confine women to domestic roles. Women are expected to maintain a peaceful home environment by managing household chores like cooking, cleaning, and childcare, allowing men respite from their workday. This traditional perspective assigns women subordinate roles while granting men authority. Women are further bound by societal expectations to conform to normative roles, including childbearing and child-rearing responsibilities. This arrangement ultimately benefits men, as they are relieved of the burden of childcare while women are tasked with nurturing and raising children alongside their domestic duties. Plath believes that marriage is a tool for female exploitation through her protagonist Esther Greenwood, who has become disillusioned with these severely restricting norms of society. It was not intended to protect women. Its purpose is to limit their independence and imprison them in the confines of the home.

In the American society depicted in Plath's novel, married women were expected to conform to traditional gender norms, primarily focused on domestic duties and child-rearing. However, Esther, a prominent character, preferred to view society through her own lens. As a result, the patriarchal notion of marriage left a disheartening impression on her mind. Marriage seemed to her like a restrictive experience that would force her to abandon her individual aspirations and become what the institution demanded of her. The novel presents Mrs.

Greenwood and Mrs. Willard as epitomes of stereotypical patriarchal wives, shaping Esther's negative perception of marriage. The rigid roles prescribed for married women contributed to her aversion toward the institution. She grappled with societal expectations of chastity and grew disillusioned with the narrow-mindedness of boys. Consequently, Esther turned against marriage, resolving never to enter into it. Esther lost her father at the tender age of nine, after which her mother had to work tirelessly to support the family. Her mother wished for Esther to become a typist, enabling her to find employment after college. Thus, women were not only burdened with domestic responsibilities but also expected to sustain the household financially when circumstances demanded.

Since my father passed away, my mother has supported us by teaching typing and short hand, even though she secretly detested it and blamed him for leaving no money since he didn't trust life insurance salespeople. She constantly pushed me to pick up shorthand after college so I could have both a degree and a useful skill (Plath 40). “Even the apostles were tent makers”, she’d say, “they had to live, just the way we do” (41). Esther’s impressions of marriage are pessimistic; she considers the institution of marriage as a type of authority utilized by males to repress the rights of women. Mrs. Willard regularly discusses her vision of marriage life with Esther. Mrs. Willard is a stereotypical housewife with a conventional, mostly patriarchal understanding of marriage. Her beliefs on the chastity of men and women are extreme. When Esther comes to their home, she notices her closely to get some idea about her virginity: “Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper, she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look, and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not” (Plath 74).

Mrs. Willard works as a working lady and completes everyday responsibilities. There are several instances in the book when Esther perceives male agendas to subjugate women via marriage and domestic responsibilities. She discovers Mrs. Willard putting a lot of effort into fixing her husband's worn-out suit when she pays her a visit. Mrs. Willard embellishes the braid with "tweedy browns and greens and blues patterning" (88). However, it is no longer employed as a wall decoration and is now utilized as a kitchen mat. This is how Esther records her response to this situation: “And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man

showered on a woman before he married, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (81). These noteworthy statements highlight the prevalence of men in society. She understands the true meaning of the sly gift-giving practice before to marriage. She believes it's all part of the male strategy to trap women. This highlights men's major role in marriage partnerships and highlights women's subservient positions in it. Consequently, Esther is compelled to perceive marriage as a male scheme to deny married women their independence.

For Esther, the process of having children and the institution of marriage both works together like a spider's network. "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" (81). Words like "brainwashed," "slave," and "numb" convey her gloomy attitude on marriage. The act of having children is a metaphor for women's imprisonment and ensuing agony. Linda Wagner-Martin (38) suggests that Esther is acutely aware of the choices available to her in life. Esther understands that a woman must either pursue a career or embrace the role of a housewife; attempting to excel in both simultaneously is not feasible. In a pivotal scene in chapter six, Esther finds herself in the hospital with Buddy Willard and encounters a pregnant woman on the brink of giving birth. Esther perceives the table upon which the woman lies in the hospital as a torture table, noting its unsettling features such as "metal stirrups," assorted "wires," "instruments," and "tubes." The pregnant woman's belly appears to Esther as resembling "an enormous spider fat stomach" with "two little ugly spindle legs." (Plath 68) As the woman undergoes the process of giving birth, the sounds she emits are described by Esther as inhuman whooping noise. These are terrifying details. A medication was administered to the patient to help her cope with the agony of birth. To Esther, this medication seemed to have been created by a male. The drug works to reduce the pain. The woman will, at some later time, start conceiving another baby: "…when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again" (68).

2.5. Identity Crisis and Self-discovery in *The Bell Jar*

Chapter Two: Esther`s Aspirations Against Social Expectations in *The Bell Jar*

In *The Bell Jar*, it is made clear how Esther's lack of self-esteem, extreme indecisiveness, and an immanent identity crisis turn her into a depressed young woman who wants to end her life. The main character is at the age of adulthood, and must decide what adult identity she wants to adopt, and what kind of future lies ahead of her. She doesn't feel like she belongs anywhere, though. That's the kind of disorientation we're going to explore here. In particular, Esther's a keen observer of potential female role models, and she's starting to try out some of them. Esther's problematic situation is illustrated by a few female role models. Esther's behaviour is influenced by the expectations of a society in which women and men are expected to live according to identical standards. Even though she feels sexually aroused, yet she has to bow to society's commandment of purity.

Indeed, societal norms dictate that women should enter marriage as virgins, adding to Esther's internal conflict as she grapples with her own desires versus societal expectations. She observes that women often sacrifice their careers for the sake of children and family, a path she resists. Esther's self-image is fractured by her sense of not belonging anywhere, leading her to internalize negative events as reflections of her perceived inadequacy. Feeling disconnected, Esther retreats further into herself, akin to being trapped in a bell jar where she observes the tumultuous events around her while feeling the suffocating pressure of societal expectations.

Various factors contribute to Esther's sense of resignation and desire to end her life, including rejections, electric shocks, and the pressure exerted by her mother. Ultimately, her decision-making becomes constrained by two seemingly irreconcilable choices.

The protagonist embarks on a quest for personal values by delving into her innermost self. However, she finds herself grappling with the vastness of New York City, which offers numerous opportunities for shaping her life, leaving her feeling overwhelmed and alienated. This sense of being an outsider is particularly palpable during her visit to the United Nations, where she witnesses the interpreters' impressive skills. Instead of being inspired, she is consumed by thoughts of her own limitations and the things she feels incapable of achieving. She says: "I felt dreadfully inadequate. The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn’t thought about it" (Plath 78). Esther's lack of motivation is underscored by a pervasive pessimism in her encounters. She interacts with individuals who dismiss her ambitions, prioritize consumerism, and seek to limit her interests to superficial pursuits like fashion and social events. Esther's

dilemma is vividly depicted, echoing the symbolism of the fig tree. She grapples with the overwhelming pressure to make a choice, yet finds herself paralyzed by indecision. This inner conflict is poignantly articulated by Jay Cee, her boss, who provides a precise description of Esther's predicament.

After Esther is asked the question about her career aspirations, Jay responds, "She wants to be everything" (106). Esther genuinely finds elements of each role model attractive, but she is unable to make a connection between them and live by them, therefore the response is quite appropriate. She experiences a similar feeling when she reads the narrative of the fig tree, which represents her life decisions: "to crawl in between those black lines of print...and go to sleep under that beautiful big green fig-tree" (57). The protagonist attempts to avoid any decision-making questions and wants to close her eyes due to the pressure of having to make a choice.

As a first step in reducing the options and overcoming her personal identity issue, Esther looks for role models whose roles she considers appropriate and deserving of imitation. Esther is presented with considerably more than two female personas as potential duplicates. Doreen and Betsy, her supervisor Jay Cee, Dr. Nolan, the mother of her lover, Mrs. Willard, her own mother, and Joan are all present. For instance, the personas of Doreen and Betsy, two of her classmates, are stereotyped. They stand for two different kinds of female role models. Doreen is promiscuous, bored, and seductive. Betsy wants a large farm, a large family, and marriage. Esther is first tempted by Doreen's portrayal of a free-spirited, sexually active woman who defies the 1950s purity ideal and remains a virgin until marriage, and she exclaims, "Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice was speaking straight out of my own bones" (7). Their relationship is merely temporary. When Esther and Doreen go out at night, she identifies herself as Elly Higginbottom. She acts in this way anytime she has extreme insecurity and wishes she could change into someone else to get away from the circumstance. Thus, the change in name foreshadows what is to come while also exposing the trustworthiness of the narrator: Esther soon discovers that Doreen's manner of life is insufficient to satisfy her own inner emptiness.

For Esther, the only significant social distinction among individuals was whether or not they were virgins. The main character yearns for her defloration because she thinks it would result in a "spectacular change" (85). But Esther is fully aware that doing this would go against societal mores, and it would require her to make another choice. First, the protagonist's conflicted

feelings are made evident when, in spite of her wish to have sex before getting married, she quickly decides to reject her promiscuous companion Doreen's actions:

> I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. I was Betsy I resembled at heart. (25)

It is best to explain Esther's disengagement from fake identities on her own insecurities. She wants to distinguish herself by her purity, but she also finds something alluring in what is forbidden. The pressure of societal conventions that Esther doesn't really want to succumb to just makes her uncertainties worse. The mother and housewife Dodo Conway, who lives next door, gives Esther a peek into what could be in store for her own future. Six-time mother Dodo walks beneath Esther's window, appearing joyful and content with her life. It is implied that Esther will not recognize this route as her own because of her belief and presumption that as a wife and mother, "afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (90). Esther's melancholy mood paralyzes her as she grows more and more sluggish. When she says this, it's clear how detached and apathetic she is:

> The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence. I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn’t hear a thing. (20)

Esther's lack of desire to engage with the world leads to her withdrawal from it. The repeated mention of "silence" juxtaposed with "noise" underscores the metaphorical gap between her and the world, emphasizing her perception of being under a bell jar. While she observes the world around her, Esther feels unable to actively participate in it, assuming more of an observer role.

During her depression, Mrs. Greenwood arranges for Esther to see a psychiatrist, a prospect she resents, especially considering the family's financial constraints. Following a session with the psychiatrist, Esther encounters a sailor and once again adopts the persona of Elly

Higginbottom. Feeling unsettled by her experience with Doctor Gordon, Esther retreats into her alternate identity of Elly as a coping mechanism.

The sailor tries to kiss Esther and flirts with her. Unfortunately for her, she tries to flee the sailor's closeness during the aggressive setup, believing she recognizes Mrs. Willard as a woman dressed in a brown costume. Esther realizes that Mrs. Willard should bear the entire blame for what is still to come after her unsatisfactory meeting with Dr. Gordon and the tense situation on the street, which she purportedly revealed. Not only does Esther reject Mrs. Willard's duty as a subservient wife and mother, but she also uses her as a scapegoat. The reader is able to closely observe Esther's responses in a range of situations thanks to the text's attentiveness to all these interpersonal exchanges. Every interaction she has reveals a different aspect of her personality. It's as though her complex personality and disintegration expose the reader to a pervasive emotional and sociocultural illness. In the future, when the arrow is the man himself, the protagonist refuses to accept the position of a woman as "the place the arrow shoots from" (74). Mrs. Willard explains to Esther that a wife's responsibility in a marriage is to support her husband and assist him in achieving his own objectives. She is unable to lead the promiscuous and unusual lifestyle that Doreen does.

Her connection with Buddy Willard is crucial to understanding her identity conflict; she pretends to be the ideal girlfriend and says they are engaged, but in practice, all she does is resent him for not caring about her writing or her goals in life. She sort of strives to be the perfect partner to a man who, in the eyes of the public, would make the ideal spouse. But when he admits to her that he has previously had premarital sex, Esther loses all emotional attachment to him. He is seen by Esther as a hypocrite, and her disapproval of him is not lessened by his confession. Esther's sense of justice is heightened by the disparity between men and women's rights to live free lives and premarital sex: "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" (85). These observations shed light on the double standards prevalent in American society, where women are pressured to maintain their virginity until marriage, while men are not subjected to the same scrutiny for their premarital sexual activity. In some cases, men are even excused for engaging in extramarital affairs after marriage. These double standards reflect a societal confusion that extends beyond the novel's narrative, prompting readers to contemplate the conflicting messages sent to young

women in 1950s society. Such contradictions highlight the complex and often unfair expectations placed on women regarding their sexual behavior, while simultaneously perpetuating a culture that excuses similar behavior in men.

According to Elizabeth J. Clapp, "the masses media offered women contradictory messages...[and] psychologists suggested equally conflicting roles for women, some of which emphasized domesticity, others undermined it" and the women who decided to work outside the house were often criticized for doing so (348).

The conflict between Esther's real and fake identities, as well as her slow spiral into melancholy and final death, are all shown in *The Bell Jar*. Esther has come to a crossroads where she needs to come out of her transitional state and confront the moral and social norms that her sociocultural environment has imposed upon her. She is faced with a world that not only contradicts but also does not share her ideals. It is important to consider both Esther's psychological condition and societal institutions while trying to interpret her actions. When Esther's mother informs her that she was rejected from Harvard's writing program, her already precarious psychological state worsens. The world of Esther has been shaken. For Esther, the abyss means having to spend an entire summer in the suburbs, in the company of stereotypical suburban mothers and housewives from whom she wants so much to distance herself. Half-hearted she attempts to escape from the closing bell jar that envelops her.

Esther's decision to write a novel during the summer, wherein her heroine would be a disguised version of herself named Elaine, illustrates how she becomes ensnared in fictional self-conceptions and idealized identities. Through this act of creation, Plath reveals Esther's longing to escape her own reality by crafting alternate personas and role models. This endeavor reflects Esther's struggle to reconcile her own identity with the societal expectations and pressures placed upon her. But in the end, Esther only starts to really consider suicide and have death dreams as she keeps realizing her own limitations. As a result, Esther is set back and leads herself to a dead end and a creative impasse. The protagonist's unease with the environment becomes increasingly apparent. Her despair paralyzes her, causing her to lose her sense of direction and become unable to regulate her behavior.

As a young person caught in an oppressive environment that attempts to dictate the kind of life she must lead, Esther tries in despair to make the right decisions in her life—or, to put it

another way, avoids making many decisions out of fear of making the incorrect ones. This pressure eventually leads to her mental breakdown.

2.6. Patriarchy and Power Dynamics

Patriarchy stands out as one of the earliest and most enduring systems of domination, subordination, and exclusion in recorded history. Despite its pervasive influence, it often evades recognition, even by women themselves. Ironically, although patriarchy remains a fundamental structure of inequality, its significance is frequently downplayed or overlooked. In a curious twist, the concept of patriarchy was not initially introduced by feminist theories. Instead, many 19th-century social scientists portrayed it as a more advanced or sophisticated form of social organization compared to supposed primitive matriarchies. This historical perspective highlights the complexities and challenges of understanding and addressing patriarchy's entrenched power dynamics.

Patriarchy can be understood as a political system that inherently favors men over women, resulting in unequal distribution of power to the detriment of women. Essentially, it's a primitive social structure where authority is concentrated in the hands of a male figure, typically the head of the family, and extends this power to even distant male relatives within the same lineage. In the latter half of the twentieth century, feminist theories further developed and broadened the understanding of patriarchy, shedding light on its multifaceted manifestations and impact on society (Bhasin).

Indeed, many social sciences had relegated the concept of patriarchy to ancient civilizations, viewing it as a relic of the past. However, for numerous feminists, patriarchy transcends historical epochs and civilizations. It encompasses a complex web of social, political, and cultural structures that continue to shape contemporary societies, influencing everything from family dynamics to economic systems and political institutions. For feminists, patriarchy is not merely a historical artifact but an ongoing system of oppression that persists and evolves in various forms around the world “the unequal distribution of power between men and women in certain aspects of our societies” (Bhasin), most forms of feminist critics characterize Patriarchy as an unjust social system that subordinates, discriminates or is oppressive to women.

As Carole Pateman writes “The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity are the political difference between freedom and subjection.”, All socio-political structures that perpetuate and enforce male supremacy over women are collectively referred to as patriarchal institutions, or simply patriarchy. Patriarchy is commonly defined by feminist theory as a social construction that may be subverted by exposing and evaluating its structures and practices. Men defend their dominance by focusing on the perceived and actual biological distinctions between the two recognized sexes and claiming that women are biologically inferior.

Both feminists and non-feminist thinkers acknowledge that patriarchy has its historical roots in the family, where the father exercises leadership (both legally and practically). This leadership is then projected onto the entire social order, which is upheld and strengthened by a variety of mechanisms and institutions, including "the Institution of Male Solidarity."

Through this institution, men as a social category oppress all women as a social category, both individually and collectively. Women are also oppressed individually in various ways, with laws and religion serving as the primary "peaceful" means of controlling women's bodies, minds, sexuality, and spirituality. But frequently, the use of physical, sexual, and/or psychological violence reinforces these nonviolent methods.

2.6.1. Male Dominance and Alienation in the Novel

In Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, the central theme revolves around Esther, the protagonist, and her struggle with alienation as she seeks to establish her female identity within a patriarchal society during the Cold War era (Smith). Esther harbors a deep disdain for the male-dominated culture prevalent in her community, leading her to reject the concept of marriage. Through vivid imagery of blood, sickness, and vomiting, the author portrays an environment fraught with ineffectiveness, which Esther resists despite feeling trapped within the confines of the same society. Society imposes the expectation that women exist primarily as companions to fulfill men's sexual desires within the institution of marriage. Consequently, women are expected to subjugate themselves to their husbands. These societal norms contribute to Esther's sense of alienation as she endeavors to distance herself from the constraints and realities of her environment. For instance, she contributes articles to magazines promoting consumerism and

femininity, ideals that are tied to marriage and domesticity (Plath). Her community pressures her to emulate the expectations set forth by her editors.

In addition, she is driven by the two elements of marriage and homemaking to a state of emotional isolation. When she quotes the mother of her boyfriend, Mrs. Willard, the teacher, and the professor's wife, the situation becomes clear, “what a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security” and “what a man is, is an arrow into the future and what a woman is, is the place the arrow shoots off from” (Plath 74). Here, she cites those statements as one of the reasons she has never wanted to get married. She disagreed with the notion that men are the only ones who can offer women unending security. Furthermore, she hated being a housewife—the arena where men shot. She is not a part of the thinking that was prevalent at the time among ordinary American women. She aspired to fulfill her goals as a wife and mother as well as in a variety of other ways; by comparison, she compared them to the Fourth of July rocket's colored arrow, which points in all directions in pursuit of excitement and change (Plath 87). Noticeably, she finds the society’s desire to have her conform to the social norms to conflict with her interests.

Moreover, her alienation is apparent when she's admiring famous women in a novel and ignoring their shortcomings created by the chauvinist climate. For example, Mrs. Willard, despite a successful career, allows her husband to dominate her and treat her as he sees fit. As a result, the main character wonders how she could be successful and still be married to the same dominant men.

In the other hand, Esther's boyfriend, Buddy, dismisses her poetry as insignificant, she also reflects on how her pursuit of love allows Buddy to exert dominance over her, as she unquestioningly accepts everything he says as truth. Furthermore, during her time in New York City, Esther is depicted as disconnected from the social fabric of the area. The city portrays men as the ultimate symbols of success, and women's progress is often defined by their association with their male counterparts. For instance, it's only when Buddy visits Esther at college that other girls begin to show her respect, regardless of their previous unfriendliness. However, Esther refuses to conform to this ideology. Despite her desire for love and connection with men, she

perceives them as hypocrites and exploiters. This sentiment is highlighted when she recoils from Buddy after he admits to sleeping with a waitress. Initially, Buddy presented himself as innocent, leading Esther to feel more experienced in love than him. However, his hypocrisy ultimately leads Esther to decide against marrying him.

The novel delves into the theme of male dominance through the character of Marco, who epitomizes the extreme manifestation of a male-dominated society. Marco's interactions with Esther are characterized by aggression and violence, emblematic of the patriarchal perspective that views women as objects to be dominated and controlled. His treatment of Esther mirrors the societal belief in women's inferiority to men and the notion that men have the inherent right to exert dominance over women.

2.6.2. The Elder Women Characters' Patriarchal Structures

The observation that not only men but also older women conform to and reinforce patriarchal structures in the novel highlights a significant aspect of gender dynamics. It underscores how patriarchal norms and values can be internalized by individuals, including women themselves, despite the detrimental impact it may have on them. Mrs. Willard serves as a prime example of how older women exhibit a patriarchal outlook, perpetuating societal expectations and reinforcing traditional gender roles. This portrayal offers insight into the complexity of gender relations and the ways in which patriarchal ideologies can be ingrained in individuals across generations.

To Esther, Mrs. Willard, Buddy's mother, is trying to reinforce the patriarchal view of men and women. Her views on marriage are especially convincing. Mrs. Willard says that "what a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security" (74). This quotation reflects a perspective rooted in conventional gender norms where the man is depicted as taking the leading role while the woman assumes a more passive stance, characterized by submission and modesty. She is portrayed as supportive of her husband's endeavors to achieve success through his work. Nonetheless, the book illustrates how this viewpoint has a detrimental impact on even the women who hold and adhere to these beliefs. The section that recounts Mrs. Willard's experience creating

a rug that takes weeks to complete and is then completely destroyed by foot traffic presents a startling picture of the disrespect that women have for the duty and labor of being wives—a sentiment that Mrs. Willard herself supports. She is exposed as a patriarchal woman when she allows this to happen because she is unable to see the unfairness of her treatment and is afraid to speak up.

The novel's older female characters—like Esther's mother—embodied patriarchal systems that mirrored 1950s society expectations for women. In order to assist her husband as the family's main provider, Esther's mother gave up her own goals and profession in accordance with the patriarchal standards of the period. This relationship reinforces established gender roles and power dynamics by reflecting the idea in society that women should put their husbands and families before their own goals.

The influence of patriarchal norms on mental health is also explored in the novel, with Esther's primary moral conundrum being the decisions she must make in a culture that suppresses women's freedom and agency. The book emphasizes the oppressive systems that were in place and how women who attempted to escape them were treated unfairly; in order to achieve her objectives, Esther had to battle patriarchal expectations. The novel depicts women's captivity and resistance within the framework of patriarchy, illuminating the various ways in which women have rebelled against and overcome these obstacles throughout history.

2.7. Conclusion

Plath offers an insightful analysis of the societal forces that influence the experiences of its female protagonist, Esther Greenwood, in mid-20th century America. The novel explores the complex interplay between patriarchal authority, gender norms, sexual expectations, and individual identity crises. Through Esther's journey, Plath sheds light on the challenges that those who strive for self-discovery encounter in a society that values conformity and conformity over autonomy and individual expression. This essay aims to examine the multifaceted themes and poignant insights of *The Bell Jar*, illustrating how Plath's work remains highly relevant and resonant with contemporary readers today.

Chapter Three: Analysis and Interpretation of *The Bell Jar*

2.1.Introduction

Major American writers, thinkers, and novelists agree that women were really oppressed, and they shed light on this oppression. Women, throughout history, lived in misery and their situation in general was very horrible because they lived in patriarchal societies where man is the predominant in all the domains. Women experienced oppression with all its forms: mental, psychological, physical, and sexual. Oppression entails fear, anxiety, and sense of inferiority for women.

The American writer, Sylvia Plath, in her famous novel, *The Bell Jar*, sheds light on female oppression and suffering. She explores female sufferance through her characters and well articulates this theme with that of madness because both themes go hand in hand with one another. Plath explains women's struggles, fears and their impotence in rebelling against society as an attempt to change their miserable situations. The only solution women find is writing; a strategy which gives voice to silent females who could not speak a word. The majority of female writers do not use their real names in their works; they use pen names like Mary Ann Evans and Sylvia Plath and others write anonymously like Jane Austen.

2.2.Sylvia Plath`s Biography and Works

Sylvia Plath is arguably one of the most celebrated American authors of the 20th century. Born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Plath Her father, was a German immigrant and a professor of entomology at Boston University. Her mother, Aurelia, was the daughter of Austrian immigrants and taught high school German and English. At the age of eight Sylvia published her first poem. The same year, 1940, her father died of gangrene caused by untreated diabetes. His death had a profound impact on the young poet. After Otto's death, Aurelia returned to teaching to support her children, with the help of her parents. Though she struggled to maintain the family's lifestyle, she always provided Sylvia and her younger brother, Warren, with various lessons and instilled in them a deep love of learning. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Sylvia continued to publish poetry and fiction in regional newspapers and magazines, and published her first national piece in the Christian Science Monitor in 1950.

Plath was a bright and tenacious student who excelled at Wellesley High School and Smith College. She published poetry and short stories, earning a guest editorship at Mademoiselle Magazine, which became the basis for *The Bell Jar*. During this time, she attempted suicide and was sent to a private psychiatric hospital. Plath returned to Smith, wrote an honors thesis on Dostoevsky, and earned a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge University. Plath and Hughes moved to the US, where she taught English Composition and met Anne Sexton. In 1960, she published her first poetry volume, *Colossus* and Other Poems. After returning to the UK, she had two children, but suffered a miscarriage and discovered her husband's affair with Assia Gutmann Wevill. The couple separated and Plath moved with her children to a flat in London's Primrose Hill, where she tried to build a new life for herself and her children. "My life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time." (Sylvia Plath). She wrote a great deal and was quite creative after her split from Hughes. It was during this time that she wrote the "*October poems*," which cemented her place in the annals of twentieth-century literature. Plath penned *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, *Poppies in July*, and *Ariel* in just five months. She continued to decline into sadness despite her productivity.

Sylvia Plath one of the most important representatives of confessional poets, Plath is best known for her two published collections of poetry: *The Colossus and Other Poems*, and *Ariel*. Plath's poems are intensely autobiographical, which explore her own mental anguish, her troubled marriage to poet Ted Hughes, her unresolved conflicts with her parents, and her own vision of herself. In 1982, Plath won Pulitzer Prize posthumously for The Collected Poems, a poetry collection which was edited by her husband Ted Hughes. She has inspired countless readers and influenced many poets since her death in 1963.

As Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, three weeks before Plath committed suicide. Critics tend to regard this novel as a semi-autobiographical one. Based on Plath's early life experiences, *The Bell Jar* tells the confusion and struggles of Esther Greenwood, a nineteen-year-old college student who descends into psychological breakdown. Sylvia Plath, an American writer, focuses on feminism in her literary works, often focusing on themes of separation, alienation, suicide, and female miseries. Her works often reflect her own experiences and emotions, often viewed from an autobiographical perspective. Plath's greatest feminist work, *The Bell Jar*, tells the story of an innocent girl trapped in male dominance's social

bell jar, who chooses self-victimization to escape oppression. This leads to depression and a mental gap, causing inner and outer conflict. Plath's work is often viewed from an autobiographical perspective, reflecting her own life experiences and sorrows.

2.3.*The Bell Jar*: Plot Summary

The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath's fictitious autobiography, chronicles seven months in Esther Greenwood's life. Esther had just completed her junior year of college in the summer of 1953. She is an intern writer for a fashion magazine in New York City. June is the month when Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are electrocuted to death. Due to their alleged sales of nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union, the Rosenberg's were found guilty of treason at the time of their conviction. Along with Doreen and other magazine interns, Esther resides in the Amazon hotel for women. Her mocking comments about how prim the other ladies are, echoes Esther's own sentiments. Despite her intelligence and accomplishment, Esther starts to question her own capacity to keep up her high caliber of performance. The longer summer goes on, the deeper her despair gets.

Instead of attending the magazine-sponsored party, Esther and Doreen go out with disc jockey Lenny Shepherd and his companion. To distance herself from the event, Esther describes herself as Chicago native Elly Higginbottom. She heads back to the Amazon after dropping Doreen off at Lenny's place. Much later, Doreen knocks on Esther's door while intoxicated.

Esther reflects one morning about her slowness brought on by depression: "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired"(Plath 31). Subsequently, Esther's supervisor, Jay Cee, summons her to the office due to his worries about her declining passion for her job. In an attempt to comfort Jay Cee, Esther conceals the fact that she is under two opposing pressures. She wants to become a writer, on the one hand. On the other hand, she believes that social conventions are pressuring her to pursue the more sensible goals of parenthood and family. At a Ladies' Day magazine-sponsored luncheon, Esther savors the lavish spread of food and reminisces about her own less fortunate upbringing. After the luncheon, every woman there, contracts severe food illness.

Esther talks about her previous romance with Buddy Willard, a kid from her hometown who is currently a Yale medical student. Buddy goes to see Joan Gilling, a student at Esther's college and a girl from Buddy and Esther's hometown, at a dance. But before the dance, he asks Esther out on a date, and they subsequently start going out on a regular basis. One of the subsequent summers, Buddy had a sexual relationship with a woman he works with. Just before he becomes ill with tuberculosis and checks himself into a sanatorium, Esther finds out about his adultery.

Esther makes up her mind to have sex with a man in order to exact revenge and demonstrate her independence. She goes on a date with a man named Constantin while she is in New York, but nothing occurs.

Esther feels her anxiety and melancholy rising as she waits to be photographed for the magazine. When asked to strike a position, she remembers:

> When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn't know.
>
> "Oh, sure you know," the photographer said.
>
> "She wants," said Jay Cee wittily, "to be everything." I said I wanted to be a poet.
>
> Then they scouted about for something for me to hold.
>
> Jay Cee suggested a book of poems, but the photographer said no, that was too obvious. It should be something that showed what inspired the poems. Finally, Jay Cee unclipped the single, long-stemmed paper rose from her latest hat. The photographer fiddled with his hot white lights. "Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem."(106)

Esther tries dutifully to smile, but just in time to have the picture shot, she starts crying. She goes with Doreen to a country club dance on her last night in New York, where Esther almost gets raped by a wealthy man named Marco.

When Esther returns to her mother's suburban Boston home in July, she finds herself in a worse state of depression following her rejection from a writing course. She has trouble sleeping,

doesn't take showers, and has trouble writing and reading. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon, sees her, but following one session of electroconvulsive therapy, Esther starts to examine suicide reports and methods of self-slaughter.

Esther visits her father's grave and experiences her first-ever grief after an unsuccessful attempt to work as a hospital candy-striper. She decides to act on her suicidal inclinations after depleting all of her savings. She goes down into her mother's cellar, hides in a far-off alcove, and downs fifty sleeping tablets. Esther wakes up in darkness, hearing voices and feeling wind. She calls out for her mother but is mistaken for a blind man. A doctor visits her, and she is found to have intact eyesight. Esther's mother and brother visit, but she denies calling out for her mother. She is moved to a city hospital and placed next to Mrs. Tomolillo, who she believes is trying to kill herself. Esther's mother criticizes her for not cooperating with the doctors and suspects they are giving out false names. She is moved to Mrs. Mole's old room and uses a ball of mercury to test their patience. Esther is taken to a private mental hospital in Boston, where her mother worries, she will never write again. She is trapped in her illness, and her family prevents her from jumping. Esther meets Dr. Nolan, a new psychiatrist, and meets Valerie. Dr. Nolan warns her electroshock treatment was incorrect and warns about a different outcome. Esther watches Miss Norris, an older patient, closely and receives insulin injections daily. She has a lobotomy and feels fine. Esther is moved to a sunnier room and Miss Norris moves to Wymark; a ward considered for recovery. A recently admitted patient investigates with Joan Gilling.

Joan, suffering from painful bunions from a terrible job, visited an asylum after reading about Esther. She began wearing rubber boots to work, which Esther found crazy. Joan stopped working, answering calls, and considering suicide. Joan was sent to a psychiatrist, who advised her to undergo group therapy. Joan discovered Esther missing in newspaper clippings, leading her to commit suicide in New York. Esther wakes up in the middle of the night with an insulin reaction, and Dr. Nolan tells her she will no longer have visits. Esther dislikes visits from old teachers, employers, and her mother, who asks for her explanation.

Esther moves to Belsize, a ward for women near release, feeling relieved about the reduced threat of shock treatments. She and Joan play bridge and gossip, and Joan finds a picture of Esther in her fashion magazine. The next morning, Esther hides in the hall, terrified of the

shock treatment. Dr. Nolan comforts her and takes her to the treatment herself. Miss Huey, the treatment's nurse, speaks kindly to Esther, but she falls unconscious during the treatment.

Esther wakes up with Dr. Nolan, who helps her breathe in the open air and offers shock treatments three times a week. She recalls her love for knives and her fear of Buddy Willard's visit, which may end her life. Esther encounters Joan and DeeDee in bed, discussing women's attraction, and Joan prefers her over Buddy. Esther rebukes Joan and leaves. Dr. Nolan helps Esther get fitted for a diaphragm, questioning her maternal instinct. His unobtrusive approach gives her freedom from fear and the desire to find the right man to lose her virginity.

Joan plans to become a psychiatrist and moves to Cambridge, leaving Belsize. Esther jealously follows Joan and meets math professor Irwin at Harvard. They have sex, expecting transformation, but instead feel pain. Esther is bleeding and asks Irwin to drive her to Joan's apartment. Joan doesn't suspect her and takes her to the hospital. The doctor stops the bleeding, but Joan disappears several nights later. Esther discovers that Joan hanged herself in the woods the next morning. Esther returns to college, despite her past madness, and her mother assures her they will continue their journey. Buddy visits, and Esther helps him dig his car out of snow. Buddy questions whether Esther contributed to Joan's madness, but Esther reassures him. Esther leaves Valerie and calls Irwin to pay her doctor's bill, but she refuses. She attends Joan's funeral and waits for her final interview with doctors. She realizes her madness may return later in life.

2.4.*The Bell Jar* Analysis

The process of dissecting a literary work to uncover its underlying themes, meanings, and literary devices is known as literary analysis. It concentrates on how the author used language, structure, symbolism, characters, and other literary methods to convey ideas, arouse feelings, and have a particular effect on the reader rather than just recounting the story. It also takes into account the author's goals, the historical and cultural background, the themes, motifs, and characters, which can influence the interpretation of the text.

2.4.1. *The Bell Jar* Characters Analysis

Characters are most important aspect of a novel. Everything that happens in the book is a result of the characters' respective roles. Characters are therefore crucial to understanding the story's topic since, in the absence of strong character development, it can be difficult to decipher

the message the author is trying to get through to the audience. The novel features a large cast of both male and female characters, some of them have major and some have minor roles.

2.4.1.1. Major Characters

The significance of major characters in a novel can vary depending on the specific story. However, major characters typically play essential roles in advancing the plot, representing different themes, or undergoing significant character development. They may serve as protagonists, antagonists, or supporting characters, each contributing to the overall narrative in their unique way. Their actions, motivations, and relationships often drive the story forward and offer insights into the central themes and messages conveyed by the author.

2.4.1.1.1. Esther Greenwood

In the semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath portrays Esther Greenwood, a young woman grappling with societal expectations and her own uncertain future. The title metaphorically reflects her isolation and confusion as she navigates relationships, career aspirations, and societal pressures. As a woman from a modest background, Esther grapples with the conflicting desires for marriage and motherhood versus pursuing her literary ambitions. Due to her limited resources, the choice she faces carries significant weight.

Esther's relationships with other women in the novel are complex and often contradictory. While she initially admires different women for their various qualities, such as Doreen's freedom, Betsy's innocence, or Jay Cee's strength, their actions or personalities eventually disappoint her. Her feelings can change quickly, as shown by her initial admiration for Jay Cee's independence turning into resentment after receiving harsh criticism. Similarly, while initially attracted to Doreen's carefree attitude, she eventually becomes disillusioned by her excessive promiscuity. Even towards Joan, whose unconventional sexual orientation initially repulses her, Esther shows empathy during a medical crisis. This pattern highlights Esther's struggle to find a female role model who embodies the qualities she seeks without any contradictions.

Esther's mother, Mrs. Greenwood, is the only female character with whom she has no conflicting feelings. "I hate her" perfectly captures her sentiments. Esther's hatred is explained by two factors. Initially, Esther's mother dissuaded her from lamenting her father's passing;

thereafter, Esther saw her mother as a person who gave up her independence to further her husband's profession.

Esther's perspective on the male characters in the novel appears more straightforward. She views Buddy Willard, Constantin, Cal, Irwin, Eric, Marco, and others primarily through a sexual lens, considering them as potential partners for losing her virginity or as prospective husbands. They are portrayed with varying degrees of negativity, from Marco's outright misogyny to Buddy Willard's conceited demeanor. Following her encounter with Cal, Esther becomes disinterested in men as potential spouses, yet she still maintains a desire to lose her virginity.

Esther is a very impressionable person despite her intelligence. The fact that she tells a total stranger a false name early on in the book shows how little identity she actually has. Even her surname, Greenwood, as Linda Wagner-Martin suggests, "was satisfying for reasons both personal and symbolic, and because the novel moves toward Esther's rebirth, the image of green wood is comforting." By the end of *The Bell Jar*, Esther emerges as a survivor, although the degree of her mental and emotional healing remains open to interpretation. She demonstrates increased confidence and autonomy by directing Irwin to settle her emergency room expenses. Her responses to people and situations are clearer and more logical: she mourns at Joan's funeral, recognizes Buddy Willard as merely "a great amiable boredom" in her life, and understandably feels nervous about her meeting with the board of physicians. Contrast this to the earlier Esther who once threw her clothes out of a New York hotel window, ate raw meat, made an unsuccessful suicide attempt, and often stared catatonically into space.

2.4.1.1.2. Buddy Willard

A modern critic of *The Bell Jar* remarked that Buddy Willard epitomizes the ideal 1950s American male. He serves as Esther's beau, hailing from her hometown, embodying an irksomely self-assured demeanor. In many respects, he mirrors Esther: a bright scholar with stellar academic achievements, handsome looks, and seemingly destined for a prosperous future. However, Buddy's unusually close relationship with his mother contrasts with Esther's strained bond with her own, and his condescending attitude towards women provokes Esther's ire. He firmly believes that Esther should aspire to become Mrs. Buddy Willard for her own good. Initially, Esther might have shared this aspiration, but upon learning of Buddy's past infidelity, she instantly loses all admiration for him. Buddy's battle with tuberculosis leads to his confinement in a sanitarium for

medical students, which humbles him to some extent, yet Esther remains unaffected by his transformation.

2.4.1.1.3. Esther`s Mother

Esther's mother comes across as passive-aggressive and lacking in intuition, making her ill-equipped to relate to her intelligent yet discontented daughter. Following her husband's death, she displays an emotional detachment, failing to shed tears or allow her children the space to mourn. It takes nearly two decades for Esther to visit her father's gravesite. Mrs. Greenwood exhibits insensitivity by casually delivering the news of Esther's rejection from a writing class as soon as she arrives home. As Esther's health deteriorates to a critical point, her mother appears to internalize the situation as a personal affront, interpreting Esther's breakdown as a deliberate act of defiance. As Esther's health gradually improves, her connection with her mother remains unchanged. Prior to Esther's release from the hospital, her mother proposes the idea of pretending that the recent months were merely a nightmare. Furthermore, she implies that Esther's depressive demeanor is a deliberate decision. Despite Mrs. Greenwood's challenging life experiences, Esther finds it difficult to empathize with her mother. However, there's a lingering impression that Mrs. Greenwood's distant attitude exacerbates Esther's distress.

2.4.1.1.4. Joan Gilling

Joan Gilling, a former rival for Buddy Willard's affections, is admitted to the same posh mental hospital where Esther is recovering. Joan and Esther are the two most complex characters in *The Bell Jar*, sharing similarities such as attending a prestigious women's college, being intelligent, accomplished, and having suicidal tendencies. However, Joan comes from a wealthy family, while Esther is modestly middle-class, resulting in Joan taking for granted things Esther struggles to obtain. Joan, a physics major in college, is not typical of the upper-class "Seven Sisters" college girl. She is ambitious, doesn't feign femininity, and is not physically attractive. Critics argue that Joan's attraction to lesbianism is her realization no man will desire her.

Esther, like most major female characters in the novel, is ambivalent towards Joan, despite her creepy feelings and dislike. Despite rebuffing Joan's sexual advances, Esther seeks her help after a terrifying bleeding experience after her first sexual experience.

After Joan commits suicide by hanging, Dr. Nolan assures Esther that it is not her fault. But some critics have linked her death with Esther's recovery and rebirth. It is also ironic that Joan, with all her social status and economic advantages, destroys herself, while struggling Esther is the survivor.

2.4.1.2. Minor Characters

Minor characters in a novel often serve to enhance the richness and depth of the story in various ways. While they may not drive the main plot or undergo significant development themselves, they play crucial roles in supporting and contextualizing the actions of the major characters.

2.4.1.2.1. Betsy

Betsy, a guest intern at Ladies' Day, epitomizes the quintessential "nice girl" archetype. Hailing from Kansas, she embodies the All-American ideal, envisioning a future with a husband, a spacious farm, and a brood of children—all while adhering to the traditional value of preserving her virginity until marriage. In *The Bell Jar*, Betsy endeavors to shield Esther from Doreen's seductive influence, and initially, Esther appears receptive to her efforts. However, Esther ultimately finds herself unable to fully embrace Betsy's simplistic worldview, viewing her as a symbol of unwavering optimism—a sentiment she dubs the "Pollyanna Cowgirl."

2.4.1.2.2. Doreen

Doreen is a female acquaintance of Esther's. She is a stunning woman who does not like to engage in the dull things that the others undertake. She wants to design her own path in life, but her interests lie more in men than in her work. Esther first encounters Macro—the subject of the most horrific and violent encounter in the book—through Doreen.

2.4.1.2.3. Jay Cee

Esther's supervisor at Ladies' Day, Jay Cee, possesses a pragmatic editorial expertise, a notable exception in an era where men predominated in the profession during the 1950s. Though the interns perceive her as formidable, Jay Cee displays authentic interest in Esther by inquiring about her future aspirations and offering advice. Esther's feelings toward Jay Cee are mixed. While she respects Jay Cee's intellect and asserts apathy toward her lack of conventional

attractiveness, Esther also senses that Jay Cee and certain other women "wanted to teach me something ... but I didn't think they had anything to teach me"(6).

2.4.1.2.4. Marco

Accurately described by Esther as a "woman-hater," Marco sees women in one of two categories: Madonnas or whores. On his date with Esther, he admits to being in love with his first cousin, who intends to become a nun. Treating Esther like a whore, he gives her a diamond stickpin, throws her in a muddy ditch, and threatens to rape her.

2.4.1.3. Some Extracts used by The Protagonist Expressing her Breakdowns

1. “I buried my face in the pink velvet façade of Jay Cees love-seat and with immense relief the salt tears and miserable noises that had been prowling around in me all morning burst out into the room” (Plath 107).

In the provided passage, Esther recounts her initial breakdown, one of several, which occurs while she and her peers are engaged in a photo shoot. The photographer questions her about her career aspirations, but she finds herself unable to commit to a definitive path. Despite her desire to pursue poetry and writing, those close to her do not recognize her talent and instead attempt to steer her towards more conventional avenues. Consequently, she feels despondent about her prospects. Witnessing her peers seemingly have their futures mapped out only exacerbates her sense of confusion and indecision, ultimately leading to a public emotional breakdown.

2. “The water pressed in on my eardrums and on my heart. I fanned myself down, but before I knew where I was the water had spat me up into the sun” (170).

Esther grapples with uncertainties about her future and challenges stemming from the societal expectations regarding gender roles. She harbors persistent fears and confusion regarding her path ahead, finding herself unable to make informed career decisions. Despite her struggles, she lacks support, with even her own mother failing to comprehend her choices. In the confines of a traditional society that feels suffocating, she experiences profound loneliness and dissatisfaction. In a poignant moment, Esther recounts one of her numerous attempts at suicide, seeking an

escape from a world that has drained her spirit in the relatively brief span of her life, yet ultimately failing in her endeavor.

3. "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (258).

At the end of the book, Esther is discharged from the hospital. She experiences a sense of joy in realizing all that she has achieved during her time there, having struggled with madness induced by depression. Though her journey began with hardships, the turning point of the novel significantly alters her life trajectory.

3.4.2. *The Bell Jar* Themes Analysis

In Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, themes are intricately woven throughout the narrative, offering insight into the protagonist's psyche and the societal pressures she grapples with. Plath delves into themes such as identity, mental illness, societal expectations, and the quest for autonomy. Through the protagonist Esther Greenwood's journey, the novel explores the complexities of navigating womanhood in the 1950s and sheds light on the challenges of conforming to societal norms while struggling with one's own sense of self. Plath's vivid portrayal of Esther's inner turmoil and her search for meaning amidst the confines of a patriarchal society resonates with readers, making *The Bell Jar*a timeless exploration of human experience and the quest for self-discovery.

3.4.2.1. Depression and Mental Illness

Depression serves as the central theme within *The Bell Jar*, illustrating the protagonist's descent into a profound depressive state and her subsequent psychiatric intervention. Notably, the author's own struggles with depression imbue the narrative with autobiographical elements. Sylvia Plath's tragic suicide shortly after the novel's release lends credibility to her portrayal of the psychiatric institution. The initial signs of depression manifest early in the story as Esther navigates life in New York, finding herself unable to derive joy from typical experiences. A pivotal moment occurs in Chapter 7 when she encounters Constantin, a rare source of happiness amidst her emotional turmoil. Themes of mortality pervade her thoughts, notably highlighted in

Chapter 9 during a discussion with her friend Hilda regarding the impending execution of the Rosenberg's. Such preoccupations are common among individuals contemplating suicide.

Subsequent traumatic events exacerbate Esther's depressive spiral, notably a harrowing encounter with sexual assault at a party, leaving her despondent and disoriented. Rejection from a writing course further compounds her despair, leading to a prolonged period of apathy and neglect. Gradually, her sense of agency diminishes, culminating in suicidal ideation.

The metaphor of the bell jar symbolizes both gender constraints and the suffocating grip of depression. Though Esther briefly lifts the jar, achieving academic success and temporary liberation from the psychiatric ward, she remains ensnared by the factors contributing to her demise.

As Esther's depression deepens, it transitions into a debilitating mental illness, marked by recurring suicidal impulses and a pervasive sense of hopelessness. Her deteriorating condition is exacerbated by misguided psychiatric treatment particularly electroconvulsive therapy administered by Dr. Gordon. Despite her mother's dismissive attitude towards her illness, Esther futilely attempts to comply with medical interventions in a bid for release from her torment. .Esther's detachment from reality is starkly evident in her casual descriptions of suicidal ideation, reflecting her alienation from societal norms and personal hygiene. Her overdose attempt, while unsuccessful, underscores her profound disconnection from the consequences of her actions and the impact on her loved ones.

Plath's narrative offers a poignant portrayal of the insidious progression from melancholy to mortality, challenging misconceptions about the nature of depression and the fallacy of willpower in overcoming suicidal impulses. Esther's journey underscores the imperative of comprehensive medical intervention and societal empathy in addressing mental illness as a legitimate medical condition.

3.4.2.2. Confinement and Isolation

Plath's work is filled with a sensation of imprisonment, which is embodied in the bell jar that serves as the book's title. The bell jar represents Esther's asphyxia since it traps its beautiful contents in stale air rather than preserving them. Plath gives Esther multiple opportunities to image herself in a restricted space, such as when she compares herself to a character in a short

tale and imagines herself stuck in a tree, unable to select between figs, each of which represents a distinct path in life. This feeling of imprisonment is reflected even in the location where Esther is discovered following her failed suicide attempt—she is basically found walled up in her basement. However, the other times this topic arises in the book are symbolic, showing that Esther's experience of imprisonment is primarily mental. This is the only incident in which Esther is truly confined. The most overt sign of her mental illness is the feeling that she is stuck. Esther feels psychologically constrained by both societal norms and her mental condition. Gender norms, tradition, and her anxiety about not realizing her goals are what hold her back.

The novel's recurring motif of walls and enclosures represents physical imprisonment. Esther's example of the bell jar highlights her incapacity to overcome her mental challenges. The mental institution's windows serve as a physical barrier separating the inmates from the outside world, illustrating another kind of incarceration.

3.4.2.3. Sex and The Female Body

Plath's unorthodox portrayal of sexuality in *The Bell Jar* serves as another demonstration of her feminist perspective. Throughout the novel, the main character exhibits a resolute attitude regarding sexual matters, both in engaging and abstaining from them. She consistently prioritizes her own emotions and desires, refusing to submit to male expectations or dominance. The protagonist challenges societal norms surrounding purity and virginity, particularly those imposed by men. An example of this defiance is seen when she declines Buddy Willard's request for her to be naked, despite agreeing to see him unclothed. She declines Buddy's proposition for intercourse, rejecting the notion of maintaining her virginity or adhering to societal ideals of "purity."

Instead, she expresses a desire to engage in sexual activity with someone else, viewing her virginity as a burden rather than a virtue. She interprets virginity which is not treated equally in men and women—as a sign of suffocation and captivity. She thinks that continuing to be a virgin denotes abiding by patriarchal standards, traditions, and beliefs. Esther points out in *The Bell Jar*: “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” (85). She rejects the idea that a woman and a man world`s should be distinct when it comes to sex. Once more, she is opposed to having forced sex. Marco, a "woman-hater" (111), tries to rape her, but she fights back against his violent sexual

assault: “It’s happening, I thought. It’s happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen” (114). She, nonetheless, defends herself vigorously, delivering powerful blows. Esther opposes the attempted rape not out of fear of losing her virginity, but because she is aware of her own identity and selfhood. At a particular juncture in her life, she experiences the initiation into sexual activity through engaging in intimate relations with Irwin, whom she actively entices: "what I decided [is] to seduce him" (238). Following this experience, she perceives a sense of empowerment, viewing herself as "perfectly free" (255) subsequent to the loss of her virginity. Her engagement in sexual activity with Irwin challenges the established norms of the patriarchal society. She articulates her sense of liberation and rebellion against patriarchal constraints in *The Bell Jar* when she reflects, "I wondered how much I would bleed, and lay down, nursing the towel. It occurred to me that the blood was my answer. I couldn’t possibly be a virgin anymore. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition" (242). This experience leads her to assert her independence, declaring herself as her "own woman" (235) and expressing her newfound empowerment with the repeated refrain, "I am, I am, I am" (256).

Within *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath portrays Esther Greenwood's female body as a means of asserting agency, independence, and self-determination—a stark contrast to the societal construct of the 1950s where women were often viewed solely as objects catering to men's desires. As Esther grapples with mental illness, insanity, and neuroses, she utilizes these conditions to challenge traditional patriarchal norms and gain autonomy. Blair notes how Esther's ill state empowers her actions, suggesting that "madness and illness enable the protagonist's every autonomous action". Drobnik further highlights the relationship between Esther's declining health and her growing freedom, implying that her deliberate acts of self-harm serve as tools to break free from societal constraints symbolically represented by the "bell jar." Through this narrative, Plath offers a poignant critique of gender roles while also exploring the complexities of mental illness and its impact on individual identity and liberation. As an American women Esther actively challenges conventional gender expectations, using her rebellious nature to break free from societal constraints. Her descent into madness can be seen as a result of the oppressive gender norms and psychological torment she experiences. Paradoxically, this madness grants her the liberty to defy traditional female roles, liberating her from the grip of societal expectations. Consequently, Esther becomes a formidable opponent to patriarchal standards and traditions.

In her novel, Plath discusses her drastic suicide attempt, expressing, “What I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (156). By targeting her physical form, she aims to extinguish the constrained "self" that adheres to societal norms, hindering her path to liberation, self-respect, and self-value. Her psychological struggles lead her into a realm of her own creation, where she can assert mastery over herself, free from the grip of depression. She further says: “I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex” (235). This illustrates how the theme of the body intertwines with the protagonist's madness, illness, and her suicidal endeavor, portraying the body as a means to advance feminist ideals. This challenges the conventional notion that “the body is the object and target in power relations, and the purpose is to discipline the body in order to ensure the continuity of society” (Sabanci 60).

3.4.3. Symbolism Analysis

Symbolism is a literary device where an object, person, situation, or action is used to represent something abstract, beyond its literal meaning. In literature, symbols can be imbued with deeper layers of meaning to convey themes, ideas, or concepts in a more indirect or suggestive manner. Authors use symbolism to add depth and complexity to their writing, allowing readers to interpret the text on multiple levels and engage with its deeper significance. Symbols can take various forms, including objects, colors, animals, settings, and even characters. Their meaning may be universal or culturally specific, and they often carry emotional or thematic resonance that enriches the reader's understanding of the text. the use of symbolism in *The Bell Jar*by Sylvia Plath, adds layers of meaning to the novel, inviting readers to explore the complexities of Esther's psyche and the oppressive forces she grapples with throughout the story.

3.4.3.1. The Fig-Tree

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is full of fascinating symbolism and imagery. Nonetheless, the most well-known image is that of the fig tree that haunts Esther, the main character. The fig tree represents Esther Greenwood's mental condition. She has to decide between two options since she isn't sure one will lead to a fulfilling life. She can't decide since she would lose all of them if she

chooses one "fig" over the others. Her problem is that she doesn't know what she wants to achieve as a goal. She aspires to own and achieve everything.

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantine and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat 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. 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 80)

In the excerpt above, Esther worries about the several options at her disposal and worries that selecting one will mean giving up the others. She notes that cultural expectations sometimes force women to choose between having a profession and accepting conventional motherhood duties; many are unable to successfully do both. The battle between the good and overpowering elements of life's endless potential is symbolized by the fig tree. Esther feels pressured to select only one option and finds the multitude of options to be difficult. Esther's internal conflict between wanting to be unique and fitting in with New York society's expectations of young women is reflected in the fig tree's paradoxical character. Perloff proposes that at this time ‘‘female roles are no longer clearly defined women are confronted by such a bewildering variety of seeming possibilities that choice itself becomes all but impossible.’’ Perloff's assertion echoes Esther's struggles, mirroring a dilemma frequently encountered by young women, even in modern society. Each branch of the fig tree embodies a separate choice, illustrating the ways in which societal norms and Esther's own perceptions compel young women to restrict themselves to a single trajectory in life.

Consequently, the fig tree symbolizes the pressures placed upon young women, urging them to narrow their options and adhere to predefined roles. This metaphor illuminates the

constraints and expectations imposed on women, highlighting the challenges they face in navigating their identities and aspirations within a rigid framework of societal norms.

The fig tree serves as a poignant symbol of the challenges young women face in society, but Esther's uncertainty regarding her future and career choice exposes deeper layers of her fragile mental state. The fig tree metaphorically paralyzes Esther, compelling her to witness her own demise through starvation, thereby underscoring the severity of her psychological distress and her inability to make decisions. This unsettling imagery also foreshadows Esther's eventual suicide attempt. Throughout this ordeal, Esther observes her actions from a detached perspective, indicating a disconnection from her own thoughts and emotions. This dissociation suggests that Esther may not feel a sense of connection to the aspects of herself that are in denial or experiencing mental illness. It underscores the complexity of her psychological condition and the profound internal conflict she grapples with as she navigates her troubled mind.

Stephanie Tsank proposes that “Esther’s inability to make decisions about her future has to do with her negative perception of self and her belief that she is unqualified to make such a decision.” Beyond the impact of social pressure, Tsank's viewpoint emphasizes Esther's internal turmoil as critical to understanding the deleterious impacts of her disease on her cognitive processes. Perloff suggests that many women struggled with the limitations placed on them by gender norms, but not all of them dealt with mental health problems. This implies a strong relationship between mental disease and a person's mentality, personality, and social factors.

The symbolism surrounding the fig itself deepens our understanding of Esther's inner conflict. Esther's description of the fig as "fat" and "purple" evokes imagery of an exotic, sensual fruit, given its Mediterranean origins. The color purple, often linked to royalty, luxury, and wealth, suggests that the abundance of choices initially brings Esther pleasure. Moreover, the richness of flavor associated with figs implies that the positive connotations initially inspire Esther with a sense of abundance and prosperity. The end of the passage depicts the figs' transformation as they wrinkle and darken, symbolizing the repercussions of Esther's indecision and the eventual loss of all her options. This change mirrors Esther's own transformation as she descends further into depression later in the novel. Additionally, the imagery associated with the inside of a fig evokes sensuality and is linked to fertility and female genitalia. In Greek, the word

for fig (sykon) is also the word for vulva, directly connecting the two and providing the reader with a vivid image of sexuality.

These associations can be applied to Esther's struggle with her sexual identity, as her virginity represents another personal choice and reflects her difficulty in defining herself sexually. Esther never establishes healthy relationships with men, nor does she form strong enough bonds with women to openly discuss these issues. This further accentuates her isolation and internal conflict surrounding her sexual identity.

3.4.4. Writing Style

The Bell Jar, a novel by Sylvia Plath, goes beyond the author's personal story to offer a devastating examination of mental illness and a biting indictment of society expectations. Her distinct writing style is essential to bringing the topics of the book to life and drawing the reader into Esther Greenwood's spiral into despair. Analyzing significant aspects of Plath's style decisions provides insightful information about both the lasting influence of *The Bell Jar* and her creative talent. Plath's confessional first-person narrative allows readers to see Esther's thoughts through her perspective, evoking empathy and understanding her mental illness. The use of stream of consciousness further complicates the distinction between internal and exterior reality, revealing Esther's disorganized ideas and disjointed perceptions that define her mental condition. She creates a clear picture of Esther's surroundings through her skillful use of images. Her descriptions are often eerie and allegorical, mirroring the protagonist's emotional landscape—from the frightening fig tree to the stifling bell jar metaphor. She makes heavy use of symbolism, giving commonplace items and occurrences greater meanings that recur throughout the book. For example, the fig tree represents both the limitations of society and Esther's desire to go away.

Plath's writing explores societal expectations and the protagonist's struggle to conform, utilizing dark humor and satire to highlight the absurdity. Esther's witty observations and sardonic commentary reveal her intellect and defiance, creating a complex and nuanced character. Her novel showcases her extensive literary knowledge through intertextuality and allusions, incorporating myths, fairytales, and classic literature to enrich the text and invite deeper analysis, thereby adding depth and universality to Esther's story.

Plath's language and syntax in Esther's story reflects her mental state, with fragmented sentences indicating dissociation and fractured thinking, and long, flowing passages capturing introspection and philosophical ponderings, creating a dynamic reading experience.

3.5. The Struggle between the Inner and False Selves in *The Bell Jar*

Kroll discusses the frequent coexistence of the real, authentic self and the false, controlled self in connection to the dual notion of the self (11). Nevertheless, this coexistence is what causes inner divergence, which leads to a broken identity as oneself attempts to dominate the other. Perloff characterizes the primary aim of *The Bell Jar* as an effort to reconcile the division between one's true inner self and the artificial persona, aiming to facilitate the emergence of an authentic and sustainable identity (509). Esther Greenwood exemplifies this "fracture," experiencing an identity crisis that transfigures the once ambitious young woman into a fragmented individual requiring psychiatric assistance.

Deprived of her genuine self, she becomes ensnared by the false persona. While Esther is growing up and developing what she believes to be her own inner self, she is actually always giving in to the desires and aspirations of others around her. She goes above and beyond to get academic recognition, scholarships, and high grades. Esther finds herself confined within the role of a brilliant student, but what appears to be her own aspiration for academic achievement is in reality a reflection of the "internalized social restrictions" imposed upon her, leaving her unaware of any alternative paths for personal development. During the 1950s, young women faced significant challenges in recognizing their potential and striving for an authentic self-image due to the societal constraints imposed upon them. These constraints not only restricted opportunities for self-expression but also hindered avenues for self-cultivation.

The restrictions placed upon women such as Esther Greenwood pose an ongoing threat to their sense of self. These limitations indirectly pressure them to conform to society's artificial expectations of womanhood. Despite her conscious desire to break free of these confining constructs, Esther becomes trapped by her own psychological patterns. Rather than striving towards her own self-defined vision of womanhood, she internalizes the external restrictions placed upon her. As a result, Esther's genuine inner self becomes suppressed, leading to an internal void that deprives her of any sense of identity. Esther articulates these feelings of emptiness in the following manner:

> I felt like a racehorse in a world without racetracks or a champion college footballer suddenly confronted by Wall Street and a business suit, his days of glory shrunk to a little gold cup on his mantel with a date engraved on it like the date on a tombstone. (80)

She compares her experience to that of a brilliant football player and a winning racehorse who are both robbed of the one thing that has determined their life's purpose and end up lost. Comparably, Esther achieves her academic goals and is awarded a scholarship to explore a prospective job opportunity in New York that may launch her career. Ironically, the experience has the opposite effect on Esther. Despite the unchanged world around her, she undergoes a profound internal transformation, feeling displaced and completely detached from external reality: “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”(3).

The conformist pattern ingrained in her past behavior proves ineffective in the face of the multitude of possibilities presented by the real world outside the confines of the academic environment. Esther, having achieved the status of a brilliant student, finds herself in a situation similar to the racehorse in the metaphor, with no alternative path to pursue. She is suspended between the glory of her past accomplishments and the uncertainty of what lies ahead. A pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Jay Cee, Esther’s female boss at the New York fashion magazine, questions her about her future aspirations. Esther, taken aback, responds: "I don’t really know," I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true" (34) This moment marks a significant instance of genuine self-reflection for Esther. Esther turns to her own consciousness in search of answers and senses a division within herself. While her inner self reflects upon the inquiry, her outward identity proclaims the truth - Esther no longer knows who she is. She can no longer be defined by her previous achievements, and she does not identify with any of the traditionally acknowledged female roles. Esther's self-manufactured reality begins to disintegrate under the weight of external pressures. Esther endeavors to cling onto the remnants of her former identity, attempting to persuade herself and others of her psychological stability, while experiencing inner turmoil.

Esther's loss of her former identity renders her vulnerable in social situations with others. She is unable to envision her role within society, causing a form of depersonalization. She feels

entirely disconnected from her own body and thoughts, rendering her an observer rather than an active participant in her own life. Plath utilizes mirroring throughout the novel to accentuate Esther's internal turmoil and the difficulty in identifying her true self within the distorted reflection. Esther portrays the confrontation between her non-existent, repressed inner self and the external physical representation of her identity as two vastly dissimilar individuals. In the second chapter, Esther experiences this moment of self-awareness when she catches a glimpse of herself in the elevator mirror and observes "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into [her] face" (19). Similarly, at another point in the novel, Esther's reflection in the mirror is described as resembling "a sick Indian."

Additionally, there's an instance where the emotionally detached Esther refers to the 'stranger' in the mirror, noting: "you couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head" (118). These descriptions highlight Esther's struggle not only to maintain a connection with her authentic self but also to accept her physical appearance as reflected in the mirror. Esther experiences a sense of being imprisoned in the bell jar, cut off from the outside world, “stewing in [her] own sour air” (196). The metaphorical image of the bell jar is utilized to depict Esther's feelings of entrapment, isolation, and loss. Similar to the mirror, the glass barrier of the bell jar acts as a boundary separating Esther's inner and outer selves, confining her and distorting her perception of reality. As Esther describes it, "the face looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist’s mercury." (20).

Trapped beneath the bell jar and without her own personality, Esther attempts to fit in with her peers by simply copying their way of life, resulting in a number of false identities coexisting in her mind, none of which can really satisfy the emptiness she feels within Perloff speaks about Esther's "repeated attempts [...] to find both a female model whom she can emulate and a man whom she need not despise," highlighting Esther's dilemma rooted in her struggle to either fully embrace or reject the various identities presented to her as a woman (511). Throughout the novel, Esther looks up to different female figures. Doreen, one of Esther’s friends from the magazine, represents a contrast to Esther’s former composed self. Esther admires Doreen's intelligence, boldness, and ability to flout social conventions, particularly in her unorthodox sexual behavior. Doreen serves as a catalyst for Esther's suppressed wild ambitions.

While Esther expresses a desire to emulate Doreen superficially, internally she feels a closer affinity to Betsy, a more innocent and conventional character who adheres to societal rules.

Esther discovers that the several false exterior identities she adopts are appropriate for distinct situations. She so wears several fake identities as masks, modifying her goals and inner attitude in response to her environment. She alternates between Betsy and Doreen all the time, two very different female roles that push her to defy social norms and one that forces her to comply with them. Esther expresses frustration with her inability to choose between conflicting desires in her own words: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (98). This sentiment reflects the fragmented nature of Esther's consciousness. When Esther's search for identity traits among her peers proves futile, she turns to the older generation of women, seeking experience and wisdom that come with adulthood in a world filled with endless possibilities.

Among these figures is her own mother, Mrs. Greenwood. However, Mrs. Greenwood fails to provide Esther with a suitable example, ultimately becoming, as Perloff observes, "a terrifying presence in the novel" (512), Mrs. Greenwood's inability to assist Esther in developing an identity separate from academic success is evident. Esther seeks guidance from other older women, including the successful literary career of her benefactor Philomena Guinea, the ambitious nature of her boss Jay Cee, and the nurturing demeanor of her psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan. Despite the apparent idealism in their lives, their identities are fraught with unresolved contradictions and instability.

Esther creates her own false identity, modeled after the ladies and built from the several alternative false selves, as a temporary solution to her dilemma of wanting to be multiple people at once. Towards the end of the first chapter, Esther introduces herself as Elly Higginbottom and explains her choice: “I didn’t want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston” (12) By adopting this alias and imagining herself as another woman, Esther seeks the freedom to embody any persona she desires without permanently altering her true self. While the false identity briefly offers Esther respite from her crisis, it also further disconnects her from her own consciousness, exacerbating feelings of

depersonalization and detachment. Ultimately, this false identity must be discarded to allow her authentic self to flourish.

The conflict between Esther's internalized social idea of selfhood and her self-imposed identity is the cause of her inner split. Esther's subconscious gives in to societal pressure and suppresses her actual nature. Together with the manufactured reality, her phony integrity is shattered, alienating her from both her environment and herself. Esther's complete lack of self-definition is the source of these depersonalization problems. The mirror images depicted in the novel reflect Esther's struggle to bridge the gap between her inner self and its external representation, as she experiences a profound disconnection between the two images of herself. Feeling a loss of individuality, Esther is driven to explore different false selves, influenced by the examples set by other women in her life. By imitating their lifestyles and behaviors, she seeks to discover an authentic identity for herself.

The existence of false selves impedes Esther from uncovering her individuality and fully embracing it. In order to overcome the loss of identity and reestablish a connection with herself, Esther must discard the false self and forge a new relationship with her authentic self. This journey of reclaiming lost identity, as depicted in *The Bell Jar*, gains further significance in *the Ariel* poems.

3.6. Conclusion

The Bell Jar is a poignant exploration of the complexities of identity, mental illness, and societal expectations. Through the protagonist Esther Greenwood's journey, Sylvia Plath delves into the struggles of finding one's place in the world amidst the pressures of conformity. Ultimately, the novel serves as a reminder of the importance of self-discovery and the need to break free from the suffocating confines of societal norms to embrace one's true self.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

Prominent American writers, intellectuals, and novelists concur on the fact that women have faced significant oppression, and they have brought attention to this issue. Throughout history, women have endured profound suffering, as they existed within patriarchal societies where men held dominance in all aspects. Women have experienced various forms of oppression, including mental, emotional, physical, and sexual. This oppressive environment has generated fear, anxiety, and a sense of inferiority among women.

The 1950s are often considered a time of backwards movement for the feminist movement in America, with an increased emphasis on strict gender roles that demanded women to abandon their professional pursuits and focus solely on domestic duties, reversing the gains made by earlier women's suffrage movements. However, this oppressive atmosphere of limited opportunities for women acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a feminist consciousness and literary movement.

Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Sylvia Plath revolutionized societal norms through their seminal writings. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) articulated the pervasive discontent and lack of fulfillment experienced by suburban homemakers. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) presented a seminal feminist theory elucidating the historical oppression of women. Plath's semi-autobiographical narrative *The Bell Jar* (1963) vividly portrayed a young woman's battle against misogyny, offering a powerful insight into the struggles faced by women. These feminist writers critically investigated and fought against the structural subordination of women via their writings, preparing the stage for the next women's liberation movement in the 1960s, while the 1950s glorified strict gender conformity.

Indeed, Sylvia Plath, the renowned American writer, delves into the subject of female oppression and suffering in her acclaimed novel, *The Bell Jar*. Through her characters, Plath explores the profound struggles and anguish experienced by women. She skillfully intertwines the theme of madness, as it often accompanies the oppressive circumstances faced by women. Plath illuminate women's frustrations, fears, and their perceived powerlessness in challenging societal norms, ultimately illustrating their desperate desire for change. Writing becomes a crucial outlet for these silenced women, allowing them to express themselves and find their voice. Many female writers throughout history, including Plath herself, have employed pen names like Mary

Ann Evans and pseudonyms, or even published anonymously, reflecting the challenges faced by women in gaining recognition for their literary contributions.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath sharply critiques the highly restrictive gender roles and immense societal pressures placed on American women in the 1950s. Through the protagonist Esther Greenwood, Plath shows the bleak options available to women at the time - either conforming to the dominate model of becoming a submissive housewife and mother or rebelling against conventions and being ostracized.

Esther views the women from the previous generation, exemplified by her mother, as trapped in household duties without chances for mental growth or self-development. At the same time, Esther struggles with constant evaluation and questioning of her own mental health simply because she diverges from the traditional feminine norms that were widespread in the 1950s.

The novel powerfully illustrates the oppressive "bell jar" enveloping women's autonomy and aspirations in 1950s America. Whether enduring harsh psychiatric interventions or enduring relentless scrutiny regarding their looks and marital prospects, women faced limited opportunities for self-realization beyond the confines of traditional wife and mother roles.

In her critique of 1950s culture, Plath attacks the sexism that viewed women as less intelligent, irrational creatures unsuited for success in the workplace. *The Bell Jar* effectively expresses the hopelessness of a generation of American women who are straining under imposed household restraints. It provides a thorough analysis of the connections between marriage, sexuality, patriarchy, and identity conflicts in society. The novel dives deeply into the repressive forces of patriarchal authority, which shape and constrain the experiences of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, against the backdrop of mid-20th-century America.

Plath sheds light on the complicated and sometimes tense relationships between gender roles, sexual expectations, and the search for identity in a society that enforces strict standards and ideals via Esther's journey. Readers of all ages will find great resonance in Esther's tragic story as she negotiates the rough seas of maturity and interacts with societal forces, interpersonal relationships, and personal goals. This essay, will delve into the nuanced exploration of patriarchy, sexuality, marriage, and identity crisis in *The Bell Jar*, uncovering the profound

insights that Plath offers into the human condition and the quest for autonomy in the face of systemic oppression.

Appendices

Appendices

List of Appendices:

Appendices

Appendix 1:

https://www.thoughtco.com/betty-friedan-quotes-feminist-founder-3530045

American feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan was born on February 4, 1921, as Bettye Naomi Goldstein. A pioneer in the American women's movement, she is widely recognized for having ignited the second wave of American feminism in the 20th century with her book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. In order to bring women "into the mainstream of American society now [in] fully equal partnership with men," Friedan co-founded the National Organization for Women in 1966 and was chosen to serve as its first president. The organization promoted women's equality in the workplace, in the classroom, and in politics. Other significant works on feminism and women's rights that Friedan authored include The Second Stage (1981) and The Fountain of Age (1993).

Appendices

Friedan was born and brought up in Peoria, Illinois. She studied psychology at Smith College, graduating in 1942. Following her graduation, she embarked on a journalism career, contributing to various publications, including those affiliated with leftist movements and labor unions. In 1947, she married Carl Friedan, and the couple eventually had three children. Her frustration with the restrictive roles assigned to women in the post-World War II period sparked her involvement in activism and inspired her writing.

Appendix 2: Simone De Beauvoir biography and works

https://thedecisionlab.com/thinkers/political-science/simone-de-beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer, feminist, social theorist, and existential philosopher. She is best known for her groundbreaking ideas surrounding feminism; her book, *The Second Sex*, is said to mark the beginning of second wave feminism across the globe. In her book, Beauvoir argues that throughout history, women have become classified as the Other, which has allowed women to remain oppressed. She advocates for their liberation.

Simone de Beauvoir was known for many pieces of writing and ideas, particularly in the realm of feminism. Perhaps her most innovative and long-lasting ideas were outlined in her publications including *The Second Sex* and *The Manifesto of the 343.*

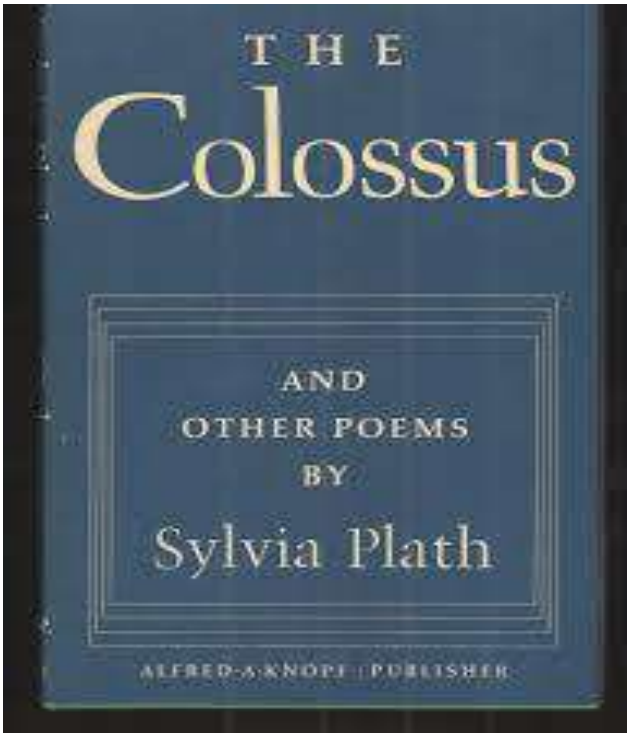
Simone de Beauvoir offers a thorough analysis of patriarchal society in her 1000-page book *The Second Sex*. According to her, women have always been subjugated and viewed as less valuable than males. Famously, De Beauvoir claims that gender is not a biological trait but a social construction, saying that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one."

Simone de Beauvoir draws on ancient creation myths and religious texts, including the Bible, to illustrate how women have consistently been relegated to the status of the Other, often

depicted as sinful or weak compared to men. She links these myths to historical attitudes, demonstrating how men have historically defined women as inferior. De Beauvoir also explores the obstacles women face in attaining economic, political, and sexual liberation. Her groundbreaking ideas played a significant role in the emergence of second-wave feminism.

In addition to her work on *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir was actively involved in advocacy, notably by signing and writing the Manifesto of the 343 in 1971. This manifesto called for access to birth control and abortion rights, emphasizing women's autonomy over their reproductive choices. It was instrumental in advancing reproductive rights in France.

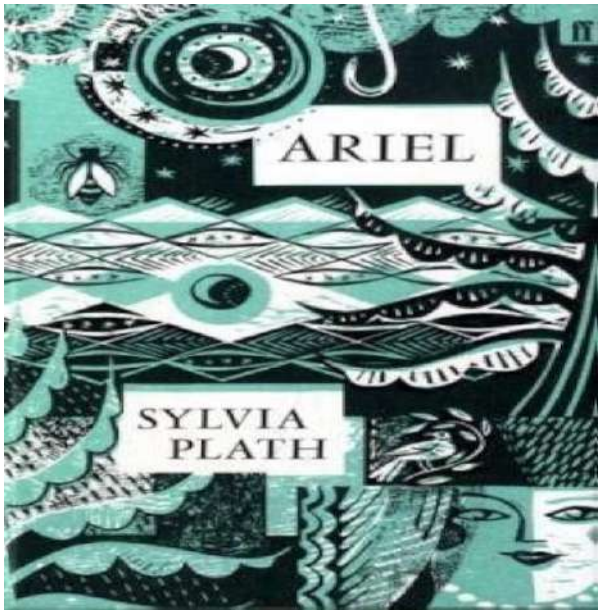
Appendix 3: *The Colossus and Other Poems*



The Colossus and Other Poems is a poetry collection by Sylvia Plath, first released in 1960. It holds particular significance as the only volume of poetry Plath published during her lifetime before her death in 1963. The title poem, "The Colossus," uses the image of a statue, inspired by the ancient Colossus of Rhodes built in 280 BC, to convey the poet's grief over her father's death. Plath's work in this collection is celebrated for its depth and skill, with critics such as Al Alvarez and Seamus Heaney recognizing her exceptional poetic talent. "The Colossus" is a free verse poem with six stanzas that are each divided into quintains. The poem's depth and intensity are enhanced by the use of literary elements such as alliteration, metaphor, imagery, and enjambment.

https://www.amazon.com/Colossus-Other-Poems-Sylvia-Plath/dp/B09GZJQ13G

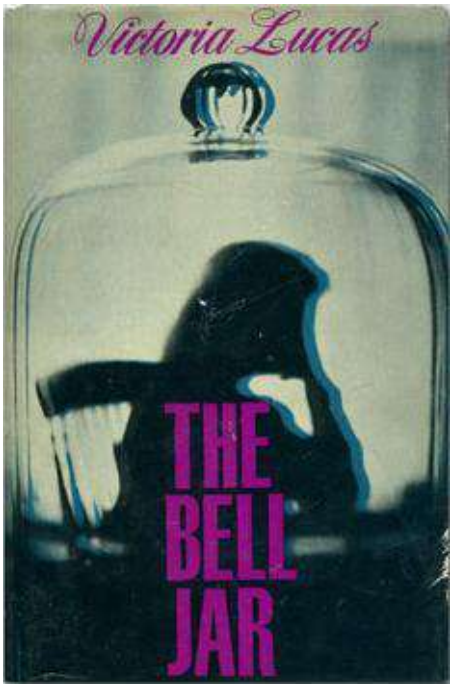
Appendix 4: *Ariel*



https://www.google.dz/books/edition/Ariel/2YiHXU0ngHMC?hl=fr&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover

Sylvia Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* is a critically important work that was first published after her death by suicide in 1963. The poems in this collection are distinguished by their fluid, vivid imagery and darkly psychological subject matter, representing a stark stylistic shift from Plath's earlier poetry in works like "Colossus." When originally published in 1965, the collection was edited by Plath's husband Ted Hughes, who substantially reorganized and altered the content by changing the poem order and adding or removing pieces. However, the 2004 republished edition restored Plath's original intended selection and arrangement of the poems, allowing readers to experience her original unedited vision for the work.

Appendix 5: *The Bell Jar*



The Bell Jar is a semi-autobiographical novel by Sylvia Plath, published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. The story follows Esther Greenwood, a young woman from Massachusetts who secures an internship at a prestigious magazine in New York City. Despite her apparent success, Esther grapples with existential angst, societal expectations, and her mental health challenges. The figurative bell jar that falls over Esther in the novel's title represents her sense of being suffocated and trapped by societal expectations and constraints. Plath gives an honest and unvarnished account of mental illness and the pursuit of self-discovery in her colorful and evocative style. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bell_Jar

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