

Hallie Mills

12th Grade - Senior

Mona Shores High School

Ms. Bradshaw

AP English Literature

Feminine Feyness

10 March 2017

Submission for John W. and Ruth V. Robinson Essay in the Humanities Competition

Feminine Feyness

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, taking place in the 1950s, follows Esther Greenwood, a 19-year old college student, as she struggles to find her direction within a narrow-minded culture that is relentlessly trying to mold her into conformity. Unable to decide between her desire to become a poet and to follow the societal norms encouraging her to settle down and start a family, she is taunted by the image of a fig tree, "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 ... 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" (Plath 76; ch. 7). Tortured by uncompromising ambivalence and a paralyzing fear of failure, Esther eventually experiences a mental breakdown, attempts suicide, and is consequently checked into a psychiatric institution. The power of *The Bell Jar* lies not only in the way Plath accurately articulates the internal experience of a young woman leading up to and following her mental breakdown, but also in the way she draws from her own experiences to relay an uninhibited account of the psychological effects of burdensome misogyny and the unavoidable stigma that accompanies mental illness.

Throughout the novel, Esther's aspiration to pursue a career as a poet is constantly delegitimized. Her internship at *Ladie's Day* magazine, which was supposed to be an opportunity for her to explore a career in editing, turns out to be nothing more than an excuse to parade Esther and the other girls in expensive clothing around the city and pose them for photo shoots and covers. Expressing her discontent, she says, "I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black

patent leather pocketbook to match ... Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus" (Plath 2-3; ch. 1). Rather than showcasing the girls' talents and achievements, the magazine exploits their youth and beauty, essentially reducing them to props. Unlike the other girls, Esther is not satisfied by this mindless consumerism that targeted women in the 1950s ("Women in"). She wishes for more. Specifically, she hopes to become a poet, to which her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, says, "Do you know what a poem is, Esther? ... A piece of dust" (Plath 57; ch. 5). Buddy serves to represent the masculine antagonism that faced women of the time period. He is constantly patronizing Esther, belittling her aspirations, and trying to force her to confine herself to traditional gender roles. When she tells him that she wants to be a poet, he tells her that she will change her mind once she is married (Plath 85; ch. 7). When she tells him her sinuses are blocked up, he tells her that it is psychosomatic (Plath 73; ch. 6). When she tells him she never intends to get married, he tells her she will change her mind (Plath 93; ch. 8). This relationship imbues within Esther an impatience with men; she views men as obstacles between her and her career. This inescapable insistence that she must settle for the expectations that have been assigned to her, that she should accept the simple, superficial life portrayed in magazines and television and be content, instills in Esther a bitter helplessness that becomes the bane eliciting her eventual breakdown.

Marriage is another source of conflict in Esther and is subject to harsh criticism by Plath. The 1950s followed the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, which brought with it a new emphasis on domesticity. After the soldiers' return, women were encouraged to give up the jobs that they had assumed during the war and settle down as wives, which is reflected in the rise of marriage and homeownership rates ("Women in"). During this time, marriage was perceived less as a choice and

more as an obligation, to which Plath was no exception. Plath herself married British poet Ted Hughes when she was twenty-four. In her marriage, Plath was hampered with financial stress, the burden of raising her children largely on her own, and her husband's affairs. Still, as a wife, she was obsessed with perfection; she wanted to prove "that she was a success in all areas women were supposed to excel in" (Middlebrook). This is a sentiment that Esther professes recurrently throughout the novel. Esther is tormented by having to choose between marriage and a career, for she is repeatedly being taught that the two are mutually exclusive. When musing about what it would be like to be married, Esther remembers when Buddy's mother spent weeks braiding a rug by hand only to have to throw it out once it is ruined just days after putting into use, "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (Plath 85; ch. 7). This belief is only reinforced as the novel progresses. When Esther visits Buddy in the sanatorium for his tuberculosis, he asks not, "Will you marry me?", but, "How would you like to be Mrs. Buddy Willard?" (Plath 92; ch. 8). In her criticism of the novel, Linda Huf describes Buddy as "anticipating her annihilation in the union" (Huf 411). This shows that Buddy expects that by accepting his offer, Esther will in a way be giving up her identity. When Esther tells Buddy that she does not want to marry him, he simply assures her that she will change her mind, as if he somehow knows her better than she knows herself. This signifies what a marriage to Buddy would have been; it would have been a life of feeling inadequate and inferior. It would require Esther to sacrifice pieces of herself, such as her love for poetry, in order to become what Buddy wanted her to be. In the words of Mrs. Willard, Buddy would have been the arrow into the future, and Esther would be the place the arrow shoots off from (Plath 72; ch. 6). Still, she cannot bring herself to eschew the possibility of a happy marriage

altogether, though all of her experiences depict it as a detriment to her career, freedom, and happiness. She is a victim of the time period, unable to give up one fig for another. This frustration breeds a despair that eventually overtakes Esther's life.

Marriage, however, is not Esther's heaviest fear, for with marriage typically comes children. Esther presents conflicting perspectives on children throughout the novel. She often thinks that she could one day want children. On the other hand, she does not consider herself to be a woman fit for motherhood. She laments, "How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby ..." (Plath 222; ch. 18). She is exasperated by her discontentment with the idea of dedicating her life to raising children as the other women around her have. Amid the Cold War and the baby boom, a woman was expected to fulfill her role by "remaining at home to take care of her husband and children, and refusing to pursue a career" ("Women in"). Children, to Esther, signify her failure to become the poet that she dreams to be. Children demand dedication; if she were to get pregnant, she would no longer be able to devote herself entirely to her poetry. In Plath's time, child care was a woman's job, and so children would ensure that Esther's days were always divided and never completely her own. Such was Plath's fate. According to Lois Ames' *The Bell Jar and the Life of Sylvia Plath*, Plath wrote in an application for a fellowship while writing the novel, "At present I am living in a two room flat with my husband and year old baby and having to work part time to meet living expenses" (Ames 10). Plath's obligation to her family weighed down on her like an incubus, but as Jeffrey Meyers bluntly asserts, "... if Miss Plath wanted to write and become famous, she should not have had children, if she wanted children, she should not have complained about the time they took from her writing" (Meyers). This statement is not fair or just, but it is realistic. Reflecting this attitude, Plath presents Esther with a

deterrent. After the internship comes to an end, Esther returns home to find that she has not been accepted into a writing program that she had been looking forward to all summer. Reeling from the loss, she begins to become unhinged. She is severely disturbed by Dodo Conway, one of her neighbors who is always parading her six, soon to be seven, children down the street (Plath 114-117; ch. 10). Linda Huf explains, "... in a way Dodo is doing it for Esther's benefit. Albeit unawares, she is portraying for Esther the future Esther fears will be hers if she fails to become a writer" (Huf). Dodo Conway, bound to spend the rest of her life in that neighborhood raising her seven children, inspires Esther to seek a means of freedom, though she does not do so until after being treated after her breakdown. The freedom that she eventually seeks comes in the form of birth control (Plath 223; ch. 18). She seeks freedom from her looming fear of becoming unintentionally barred from her dream, tied to a man she does not love by children she does not want; with this liberation, she feels that she is finally her own woman, and she is relieved of the weight of her fear.

Before she can experience liberation, however, she suffers through a mental breakdown. Her breakdown is brought on by the combination of several factors, including the minimizing of her ambitions, her scrutiny of marriage, her reluctance to having children, and her inability to reconcile all of her wishes. The tipping point is her rejection from the writing program at Harvard, after which she descends into a depression. When she becomes so unstable that she is unable to care for herself, she is referred to Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist.

Dr. Gordon is the first of many unsuccessful steps on Esther's road to recovery, which is plagued with many harrowing attempts at treatment. Esther is immediately irked by him, "I hated him the minute I walked in through the door ... He was young and good-looking, and I could see right away he was conceited" (Plath 128-129; ch. 11). Gender creates a barrier between Esther and him, and

subsequently between Esther and her recovery. She is unable to relate to him due to his being a man, and he is dismissive of her problems on account of her being a woman. He makes no attempt to understand what it is that is bothering Esther; their sessions are short and superficial, in which he shows interest only in trivial details, such as where she went to college. His minimization of her pain makes her feel more like an inconvenience than a person, and he treats her as such when he decides to prescribe electroconvulsive therapy, or shock therapy, as a means to treat her quickly and without any real effort on his part. Shock therapy is a method of treatment for major depression, such as in Esther's case; it involves an electric shock being administered to induce a cortical seizure and convulsions (Weiten 626-627). However, he is untrained in administering the therapy, and so rather than helping Esther, the treatment makes her feel even more miserable; she is left feeling confused and unable to think clearly. Esther decides to stop seeing Dr. Gordon after her first shock treatment and continues to get worse until she eventually attempts suicide, taking a bottle of pills and hiding in the crawl space beneath her house. After her suicide attempt, she is checked into the psychiatric ward of the closest hospital. Like most mental hospitals of the 1950s, it was underfunded, overcrowded, and understaffed (Weiten 635), and like her sessions with Dr. Gordon, it only exaggerates her depression. The nurses at the hospital are harsh and unsympathetic to Esther's mental state. She is regarded as a prisoner, which does nothing to relieve the emotional weight of her feeling captive within the societal expectations and her resulting mental illness. It is not until she is moved to a private institution with the financial support of Philomena Guinea, a woman who gave Esther a scholarship for college, that she receives treatment that is not painful or traumatic. There she becomes a patient of Dr. Nolan, a woman who is much more experienced and compassionate than Dr. Gordon. While Plath uses Dr. Gordon as a means to express her criticisms of the treatment of mental illness during her time, Plath employs Dr. Nolan to represent

how she believed the treatment should be. Rather than approaching Esther in a purely clinical manner, Dr. Nolan expresses interest in hearing Esther's thoughts and fears. She treats Esther with patience and empathy, and it is due to her expertise that Esther finally feels relief with shock therapy, "All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (Plath 215; ch. 18). It is only with the careful, personal attention of Dr. Nolan that Esther is able to hold her depression in abeyance.

Within the novel, Plath explores the stigma that mentally ill people face in many ways. The novel begins with Esther discussing her obsession with the Rosenbergs, who were executed in the summer of 1953, when the novel takes place. The Rosenbergs were a couple convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage and were executed by electrocution ("Julius and Ethel"). Her horror regarding their execution is foreshadowing of later on in the novel when she herself is subjected to electroshock therapy. Remembering the day of the execution, Esther shares a conversation she had with Hilda, one of the other girls participating in the internship with *Ladie's Day* magazine. Hilda says to Esther, "It's awful such people should be alive ... I'm so glad they're going to die" (Plath 100; ch. 9). Plath's inclusion of this conversation is not to comment on the Rosenbergs' guilt. Rather, Hilda's response is meant to represent the ignorant reaction many people have toward people with mental illness; such people would believe that Esther's mental illness is of her own doing, making her deserving of the shock therapy that she undergoes. In fact, while Esther is in Dr. Nolan's private institution, she is visited by a woman who tells her that her depression is entirely made up, and that she would be immediately better if she just stopped believing in it (Plath 201; ch. 16). When she reveals to her roommate at the city hospital that she attempted suicide, her roommate immediately pulled away from her and requested to be moved to a different room (Plath 176-178; ch. 14). Plath includes these passages in order to criticize the way in

which society reacts to mental illness. Esther's breakdown is met not only with ignorance, but with intolerance. Even her own mother, after Esther decides to stop seeing Dr. Gordon, says to her, "I knew my baby wasn't like that ... Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital" (Plath 145-146; ch. 12). Mentally ill people are too often considered broken or "dead". It is because of this stigma that it is so challenging for people with a mental illness to seek help and that the treatment for mental illness remained so archaic and dehumanizing for the years before and after the publication of the novel.

Inspired by the events of her own life, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* follows Esther Greenwood, exploring the issues that faced the women of the 1950s. Esther is unrestrained in her criticism of marriage, motherhood, and the gender roles that barred the young women of the decade from achieving the same successes as men. Through Esther's mental breakdown and subsequent treatment, Plath condemns the stigma that mentally ill people faced and the deficient and demoralizing treatments that were prescribed during her time.

Works Cited

- Ames, Lois. "The Bell Jar and the Life of Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note." *The Bell Jar*, Harper Perennial, 2005. 24 Jan. 2017.
- Huf, Linda. "The Bell Jar (1963): The Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Literature Criticism Online, 1983, Gale Group, go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=T001&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultType=SingleTab&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&atPosition=12&docId=GALE%7CJOYFFG197359639&docType=Critical+essay&sort=RELEVANCE&contentSegment=&prodId=LCO&contentSet=GALE%7CJOYFFG197359639&searchId=R2&userGroupName=musk63060&inPS=true. 24 Jan. 2017.
- "Julius and Ethel Rosenberg Executed." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/julius-and-ethel-rosenberg-executed. 24 Jan. 2017.
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood. "Sylvia Plath: a biography." *The Nation*, 28 Nov. 1987, p. 656+. General OneFile, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GPS&sw=w&u=musk63060&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA6141815&asid=af24f7e1c1be0e72e0211f3dd16ffb3f. Accessed 22 Jan. 2017.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. "Sylvia Plath: A Biography." *National Review*, 18 Mar. 1988, p. 52+. Business Collection, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GPS&sw=w&u=musk63060&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA6454893&it=r&asid=e53c3e9b2e1837adb0b2e2f8899f304e. Accessed 24 Jan. 2017.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Harper Perennial, 2005. 24 Jan. 2017.
- Weiten, Wayne. *Psychology: Themes and Variations*. Sixth Edition, Thomson Wadsworth, 2004, pg. 626-635. 24 Jan. 2017.

“Women in the 1950s.” *Khan Academy*, Khan Academy,

www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-8/apush-1950s-america/a/women-in-

[the-1950s](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-8/apush-1950s-america/a/women-in-). 24 Jan. 2017.