

The Bell Jar: A Psychological Case Study

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The bell jar is an image that readers of twentieth-century literature recognize all too well. The suffocating, airless enclosure of conformism making life hell for an iconic nineteen-year-old girl in the 1950s is on par with Holden Caulfield's carousel. The bell jar itself as an isolated object is simple enough to characterize – a smothering, stiff, unbreakable case, the captive helplessly enclosed within its glass walls. However, the embedded symbolic meaning is slightly more obscure. Many critics view the bell jar as a symbol of society's stifling constraints and befuddling mixed messages that trap Sylvia Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, within its glass dome. However, another often overlooked reality is that the physical, albeit metaphorical, suffocation induced by the bell jar is a direct representation of Esther's mental suffocation by the unavoidable settling of depression upon her psyche, and that this circumstance greatly alters the way in which the entire novel can and should be perceived.

The majority of critics, who tend to view the heroine primarily through our social constraints of the 50s, generally neglect to recognize that the lineage of events within the novel are entrenched in Esther's personal psychological turmoil. Therefore, the way in which the narrative simply portrays a depressive, and the way in which the narrative's construct and Esther's mental outcome is largely dependant on this fact, is clearly just as pertinent a reading as that which maintains a lens of social critique. For example, in *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*, Pat Macpherson interprets Plath's novel solely through a lens of social criticism. Esther's suicide attempt becomes an act of retaliation against suburbia (41), and her ultimate release from the mental hospital, or her "last-passed-test" is simply a reflection of her "social" and "psychic" maturity (6). Diane Bonds characterizes Esther's depression as an "intolerable psychic conflict produced by trying to meet cultural expectations of women" (57). Marjorie Perloff describes it as her "human inability to cope with an unlivable situation" (520-21). These analyses, though in no way discreditable, do not account for the immediate reality of Esther's illness. Critics tend to argue that society is making Esther sick; however, it is impossible to refer to Esther's perceptions – her experiences, her observations, her self-criticisms – without accounting for the fact that her perspective is unstable. It is unsurprising that Esther regards suburbia as a prison (Macpherson,



44) because she is already imprisoned within her own mind. Rather than predominantly ascribing symbolic meaning to the author's use of language, objects, relationships or attempting to understand Esther's inner turmoil through the chaos of the outside world, the novel can be cleanly outlined in terms of Esther's psychological illness and her skewed perception of the world around her.

As for representations of 1950s methods of psychiatric care and their role in *The Bell Jar*, critical analysis predominantly links them to societal trends and issues of the era. Again, this ascribes too much power to the inadequate medical practices of the 1950s, so much so that the emphasis on these failings also begins to eclipse the base fact of Esther's depression. Macpherson anoints Dr. Gordon as the "suburban psychiatrist" who "(mis)applies shock treatment," resulting in his "failure to adjust [Esther]" (40-41); whereas, Perloff aligns electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) with the Rosenbergs as a "frightening counterpart of [their] punishment" (518). Although Dr. Gordon is certainly an injurious patriarchic figure worthy of criticism, and Plath herself parallels Esther's treatments to the Rosenbergs' electrocution, linking Plath's chosen representations of psychiatric care to social constraints misses the fundamental point of their existence; because they are based on the existence of Esther's depression, they cannot stand alone as perpetrators to her psyche. By focusing on how the novel's medical practices are representations of inadequate social practices, the majority of critics are able to ignore the implications of Esther's psychological depression and what that signifies for the structure and evolution of the novel itself.

Esther is affected by two common and distinct causes of depression that psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck notes in his research. The first of which, Beck writes: "In the course of development, the depression-prone person may become sensitized by certain unfavorable types of life situations such as the loss of a parent" (7). The result of this, Beck states, is that such early traumatic experiences cause the depressed person to exaggerate future losses later in life. This type of relationship between losses is clearly portrayed by Esther in the novel. Essentially, Esther mentions her father three times throughout the text, and in one later scene finds herself kneeling at her father's gravestone, "howling [her] loss into the cold salt rain" (167). Plath's development of this physically absent character illustrates the underlying pain that results from Esther's

father's premature death, culminating in an unmistakable moment of mental and emotional expulsion during Esther's visit to the graveyard site. The subtle way in which Plath draws out this psychological drama is most aptly manifested in the second mention of Esther's father. Esther writes in reference to her father's death: "I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (75). This admission specifically pinpoints the sensitization that clouds Esther's psyche throughout the whole of the novel. However, her father's death is not necessarily a direct trigger to Esther's depression; rather, it causes Esther to break down without forewarning because of her tendency to dramatically overreact to later losses and assign greater meaning to them than need be. Specifically, Esther's rejection from a Harvard writing course serves as the tipping point, a loss that causes her to fully break down psychologically.

The second factor Beck outlines that is also responsible for later collapsing Esther's mental state is the notion that "depression-prone individuals spend their childhood setting rigid, perfectionist goals for themselves so that their universe collapses when they confront inevitable disappointments later in life" (7). The structure of Esther's life prior to her slow descent into madness is clearly a perfectionist's dream. She describes her college life as "nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another" (29). As a straight A student, editor of a school literary magazine, correspondent to the town *Gazette*, secretary of the Honor Board, winner of numerous scholarships and prizes like the month in New York with *Ladies' Day*, and being the only girl in physics class to receive an A (a subject she loathed) Esther's vision for herself clearly leaves no room for the possibility of error or failure.

Ian H. Gotlib and Constance L. Hammen support Beck's notion in that "Vulnerability to depression, in part, is a function of the environment that has been created by the person" (246). Again, this is vital when viewing Esther through the lens of her illness. She creates a stringent, high-stress environment for herself, one whose constraints cannot easily be broken. Esther immerses herself in a heavily rigid environment that, if breached, is potentially harmful in its reversal. And when these bounds are transgressed, Esther finds herself stuck in whirlwind so boisterous that it has the potential to suck up its victim feet first. While Esther may in part have tried and failed to adhere to the various female stereotypes around her, what is equally if not more significant is that she tries and fails at maintaining the perfectionist vision she has of her



own womanhood. Various potential female identities circulating around Esther are but a sidebar to her own feelings self-inadequacy. This whirlwind – Esther's inability to adhere to her self-imposed demands – ultimately leads to her withdrawal and collapse.

Clearly, Esther's perfectionism reaches beyond her self-demand for socially recognizable achievements. Her high expectations of self reflect Plath's construction of her heroine's voice. Not to say that it is displayed negatively; in fact, Esther's remarkable attention to detail and propensity for unwavering original analysis is what makes her so likeable. But, this does not deny the fact that her intensity may be one of the factors that leads her over the edge. Esther has high standards not only in her work ethic, writing, and ability to win scholarships and contests, but also a keen pride about her ability to pin down people, situations and emotions. Esther proclaims that she "liked looking on at people in crucial situations" (13), a preoccupation of Esther's that is closely linked to her perfectionism. Ultimately, Esther's freshness of vision turns against her; as depressive mindlessness sets in, Esther can only be pummeled with more disappointments in herself – she can no longer write, and her ability to characterize the world through her inventive lens, although never lost, begins to wane. While finally it is the rejection to the Harvard writing program that serves as the tipping point for Esther, her slump into sleeplessness, dullness, and mindlessness, and her inability to persist in originality of thought is what wounds her, over and over again, until she finally submits to her suicidal inclinations.

Evidently, a break in Esther's abilities, as well as an interruption in the novel's flow, does occur very acutely in the middle of *The Bell Jar*. This "triggering event," (Gotlib, Hammen, 246) or "precipitating event" (Beck, 7) legitimately sparks the full onset of Esther's depression. According to Beck, although such an event need not be isolated or sudden, it must assuredly be of great significance to the individual. Beck states that one of the "precipitating events" that many clinical and research reports agree on is the "failure to attain an important goal" (7). Accordingly, for Esther, the stand-out event that very clearly delineates the acceleration of her depression is her rejection from a Harvard summer writing course taught by a famous writer. Her inability, as a perfectionist, to reach this sought after goal, simply crushes her. After her mother tells Esther the bad news, Esther responds: "I slunk down on the middle of my spine, my nose level with the rim of the window, and watched the houses of outer Boston glide by. As the houses grew more familiar, I sunk still lower" (114). Immediately after the precipitating event,

Esther's depression manifests itself physically as she slinks away from her surroundings, attempting to become invisible. Chronologically within the structure of the heroine's unraveling mentality, this event is easily the last straw for Esther. She begins to remove herself from the world in a scene directly following the rejection in which she sedately and surreptitiously listens to her mother leave the house. Esther lies limply in bed while her mother busies herself in the kitchen and prepares for work. Finally, after her mother is gone, Esther, hearing carriage wheels outside her window, crawls over to inspect. Although she is still physically living and mentally aware, Esther has begun her spiral of seclusion and isolation, as is evident through the quiet and discreet way that she begins to tiptoe around her own life, as if it no longer belonged to her. Soon after, Esther gets back into bed and pulls her blanket over her head, quietly mourning: "I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to" (117).

Of course, this is not to say that Esther was once a pretty picture of wholesomeness and self-confidence. From the beginning of the novel, Esther is insecure and critical of herself and others, and is introduced to the reader as already showing signs of mental instability. She is already withdrawn, and as she informs us, it is a change that she herself has begun to recognize. Esther remarks: "I knew something was wrong with me that summer" (2) and later, "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). These are still hidden feelings of hers, something which she chooses not to succumb to yet. Later, Esther breaks into tears at the *Ladies' Day* photo-shoot, where some of her insecurities come to light. During this scene, an interesting phenomenon takes place in Plath's language. Something foreign inhabits Esther, a stealthy intruder. When Esther, crying at the photo shoot, is briefly abandoned by Jay Cee, she says: "I felt limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and everything else it could lay its paws on" (102). This alien presence, manifesting itself through a myriad of physical forces, also appears when Esther compares her face to a sick Indian (112), when "the zombie rose up" (126) to prevent her from speaking to a neighbor, and when "the hollow voice" (118) tells Jody not to expect her to come to Harvard for the summer. Plath's language implies that there is an outside force at work, simultaneously inhabiting and hollowing out Esther, something that prevents her from living



normally and functioning like she once had, and perhaps something that has been living within her for a long period of time.

After the initial misfortune of the precipitating event, a series of losses occur in which Esther experiences a snowballing effect of failures. Beck illustrates this commonplace tendency of the depressive as a "gradual increase in intensity of sadness and of other symptoms until [the patient] 'hits bottom'" in which "Each repetition of the idea of loss constitutes a fresh experience of loss which is added to the previous reservoir of perceived losses" (14). According to Esther's self-made rules, she should already know what to do with her life. She should have the next scholarship waiting for her; she should already have her future planned to perfection. Unfortunately, when the well of success runs dry, Esther is left with a frightening plethora of losses – a slowly sinking life-preserver to which she can only cling helplessly.

From the loss of admittance to the Harvard program, Esther immediately experiences the loss of her opportunity to leave home for the summer by rejecting Jody's housing offer. Although she is the one to reject the offer, Esther still mourns the loss and laments: "The minute I hung up I knew I should have said I would come" (118). Then, she sends Buddy a scathing letter that is meant to end their relationship. Regardless of her newly negative emotions toward him and his hypocrisy, Esther's letter still marks the death of a relationship that once enchanted her. Next, Esther's plan, which is to spend her summer writing a novel, fails miserably; she is only able to write two paragraphs in one day and realizes that she doesn't have the life experience needed for such a task. Still further, Esther is unable to decipher *Finnegans Wake* and decides to "junk" her thesis (124). After this, she dives into a well of self-abasement that leaves her stranded. Not only is she experiencing a towering set of disappointments, but her instilled perfectionism eats away at her as she damns herself to a life of inconsequence simply because she has prematurely failed to distinguish a suitable life-path to adhere to at her young age.

At this point in Esther's downward spiral, cues should be drawn from Esther's mother's incendiary role. Mrs. Greenwood, harmful to Esther's psyche through her unyielding passivity, is often pinpointed as having a causal effect to Esther's attempted suicide. Esther's mother is often grouped with a stream of domesticated women that symbolize Esther's conflict with the surrounding world. This conflict, dubbed by Macpherson as "the motherly breath of the suburbs" (53) implies by its title that although she is grouped with these women, Mrs. Greenwood is by far

the most openly damaging and reviled. Esther denotes her mother as "the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong" (202). Esther's mother is, in fact, a roadblock to Esther's recovery. However, it is not simply because of her conformity to womanhood – her representation of "suburban domesticity" (Macpherson, 42) or of "patriarchally-defined expectations of women" (Bonds, 60) that ultimately leaves Esther stuck in a chasm – it is because of her inability to accept Esther's fate as part of a biological paradigm. According to Gotlib and Hammen, "Few people are sympathetic or understanding about prolonged depression, believing it largely to be under personal control" (1). Esther's depression is certainly misunderstood by her mother, who momentarily gloats "I knew my baby wasn't like that...I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (145-55) after Esther decides to leave Dr. Gordon's hospital. In believing that Esther can simply turn-off the "depression switch" but chooses not to, Esther's mother essentially labels her daughter, in the meekest terms available, a liar. Undoubtedly, such a cast-aside is neither supportive nor conducive to Esther's recovery and is as much of a deterrent to Esther's formation of a healthy mentality as are any societal constraints that Mrs. Greenwood may represent. In fact, it is clear that in the immediacy of Esther's situation, her mother's refusal to accept and understand her is much more of a painful incurrence than the more general oppressive figure that Mrs. Greenwood's character symbolizes. Although the notion of the suffocation of the suburbs is by no means irrelevant, it does not explain the entirety of Esther's mental issues that make up the forefront narrative drive of the novel. In addition, Esther's perception of her surroundings is bound to be pessimistic, so it is impossible to take her negative comments about the confines of suburbia at face value. Though, in the end, Mrs. Greenwood adds to Esther's reservoir of losses, and serves as a warning to readers; if they too choose to ignore Esther's legitimate claim to depression, they may just as easily be discarded.

Due to the lack of a proper support system and a constant underlying battle against her own perfectionism, Esther turns her failures into self-rebuffs. Beck notes that "The depression-prone individual is likely to assign the cause of an adverse event to some shortcoming in himself" (9). In the middle of Esther's batch of cascading failures, she looks at the requirements of her mother's college and realizes that she is unqualified. Immediately, she turns the situation negatively upon herself. Although the reality at hand is simply that her current university's



curriculum does not match that of the city college nearby, Esther bemoans: "Now I saw that the stupidest person at my mother's college knew more than I did. I saw they wouldn't even let me in through the door, let alone give me a large scholarship like the one I had at my own college" (125). Esther's immediate reaction is to criticize what she believes her own faults to be, rather than rationally assess the problem. The quick turnaround of Esther's mental process – to an instantaneous and over-dramatized self-reproach – reflects her mental state as unstable.

Beck also states that "A clue to the genesis of self-criticisms is found in the observation that many depressed patients are critical of a certain attribute that they had previously valued highly" (11). This exact phenomenon is clearly visible in Esther's personal trauma. What bothers her is her inability to excel at the things she once valued above all else. As the writing course falls through, she loses a great deal of confidence in herself, and from then on, she cannot seem to pull herself back up on the wings of academia that once so thoroughly supported her. In the quotation above, she calls herself stupid, and later on, when she initially fails at committing suicide, she says, "But the person in the mirror was paralyzed and too stupid to do a thing" (148). Not only is Esther perpetuating the cycle of self-debasement, but she also uses the word "stupid." Because the quality that she formerly valued in herself most was intelligence, her swiftest form of self-attack is to over-dramatize her mind's incapability. When Esther is at the beach with Jody, Mark, and Cal, she ruminates: "I didn't want to go at first, because I thought Jody would notice the change in me, and that anybody with half an eye could see I didn't have a brain in my head" (155). Again, Esther's central point of focus is her waning intelligence and sharpness of observation. Although no one else in the novel comments on Esther's supposed diminishing intelligence and ability to sharply perceive, Esther does so several times, thereby pinning her focus on this symptom of depression as an unforgivable fault of her own.

Beyond Esther's immediate mental state, it is worth considering the influence of other characters on Esther's psyche. While several critics such as Perloff and Ted Hughes analyze the role of peripheral characters using symbolic inclination, this perspective often puts too much emphasis on their control over her recovery, and fails to consider the effects of other forms of treatment. For example, Perloff credits Dr. Nolan as a savior, "the only wholly admirable woman in the novel" and "the only woman whom Esther never longs to imitate or resemble," (521) who in the end allows Esther to find her true self. Perloff refers to Dr. Nolan as an "instrument" by

which Esther is able to "forge a new identity" (521). Granted, it is unquestionable that Dr. Nolan aids Esther's progress to recovery. However, with regard to Esther's recovery, it is impossible to fully gauge the ultimate success of her tentative peace with self at the end of the novel. Gotlib and Hammen note that "for a substantial number of individuals with major depressive episodes, the disorder is recurrent (Zis & Goodwin, 1979). Keller (1985) reported that between 50 and 85% of patients with one major episode who seek treatment will have at least one additional episode" (27). Although the beginning of the novel shows Esther as a peaceful mother with child, claiming to be "all right again" (3), there can be no assurance, even from the narrator, that everything will in fact stay "all right." With Esther's depression able to rear its ugly head again at any moment, it is impossible to denote Esther as healed, fixed, or well again with much assuredness. Relapses of depression, as Plath's own life illustrates, are very possible, and in the end, Dr. Nolan has very little control over Esther's future or ultimate wellness or, as Perloff states, Esther's sense of self.

Another character whose relation to Esther is often evaluated is "big toothed, horsey, goggly-eyed" Joan Gilling (216). Hughes writes, "With [Esther's] attempted suicide [the artificial ego] is successfully dislodged, scape-goated into the heroine's double, Joan Gilling, and finally, at the end of the book, physically annihilated when Joan Gilling hangs herself" (3). Hughes goes on to explain that as a result of Joan's death, Esther's "authentic self emerges," an aura that allows her to break free of her "old ego," and with the loss of her virginity finally solidifies itself as whole (3). True, Esther does refer to Joan as "the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (205). However, this is a statement that is both easily made and easily discarded. In actuality, Joan bears very little resemblance to Esther's former self. Joan's meticulousness and rendezvous with Buddy are perhaps the only similarities, traits which are both common and coincidental. And, Esther has no reason to reject her own former ambition – it is, in fact, what she once admired most about herself but ultimately rejects due to her depression's hold on her mind. It is only plausible that after Esther's potential recovery, she will return to the former habit of diligence and intelligence that she once so highly valued. Furthermore, the theoretical bell jar lifts from Esther, "suspended, a few feet above my head," (215) at the beginning of Chapter 18, immediately after Dr. Nolan's prescribed shock treatments. Meanwhile, Joan commits suicide at the end of Chapter 19 in an incident unrelated to



Esther's plight. The fact that treatment affected Esther positively, the fact that when Esther woke up from shock therapy she felt that "all the heat and fear had purged herself" and she felt "surprisingly at peace" (215) is what remains the most significant factor in the narrative structure of Esther's mental illness and recovery.

An iconic image in *The Bell Jar* is that of the fig tree – the starving Esther sitting below it; watching, with the passage of time, as each available opportunity falls to the ground in the shape of a dead fig. If viewing this scene simply as a reflection of the unfairly diverse choices that society is forcing Esther to choose from, as critics are prone to do, one can not quite encompass the reality of the situation. Actually, Esther's response to the dilemma reveals much more about her than the fact that she is burdened with the dilemma of choosing in the first place. 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. Therefore, more significant than a standalone symbolic interpretation of the fig tree is Esther's statement that she felt "dreadfully inadequate" when faced with the problem of choosing her own path in life. She says; "The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it" (77).

Perhaps *The Bell Jar* holds a line of reasoning, a theme so entrenched in its pages, that the author simply could not have been fully aware of its influence. Hughes, Plath's real life husband, recalls that "at top speed and with very little revision from start to finish she wrote *The Bell Jar*" (5). His observation hints at the stream of consciousness style that appears so poignantly in Plath's novel. However, it is crucial to note that Esther provides us with an accurate depiction of a depressive regardless of authorial intent. The question of whether or not Plath set out to effectively illustrate the mental processes of a depressive is more or less irrelevant when taking on a direct analysis of the material presented in the novel. The fact remains that Plath accomplished this; Esther can clearly be pinpointed as a depressed individual. Furthermore, Plath's success, possibly much more real than she herself was able to account for, is a testament to the validity of later and current theories of depression that had yet to be discovered during her lifetime.

If we look at the most basic cause-and-effect symptoms of depression that lead to Esther's attempted suicide, a corresponding arc emerges within the framework of the novel itself. The

first half of the book hints at the reasons for Esther's unhappiness. While these reasons are varied, from her disquietude at the Rosenbergs' execution to her anger at Buddy Willard's hypocrisy, these negative emotions alone cannot account for her later surge of depression. Her dissatisfaction with the world around her cannot solely account for her breakdown. More accurately, Esther's predisposition to loss and her intense and debilitating perfectionism are a large part of bringing about Esther's suicide attempt, and in accordance with the rise and fall of her depression, from the "precipitating event" – the rejection from the Harvard writing course – the novel experiences a lull of sorts, one that acutely mirrors the voice of a depressed individual; sullen and withdrawn from life. It is no coincidence that Esther's confidence wanes immediately after her rejection from the summer writing program, and it is no coincidence that after successful shock treatments, a tentatively uplifted voice breaks through the shadows of Esther's former instability. Plath writes in Esther's voice – that of a depressive, coming from an author and poet who was no stranger to the disease herself, and is able to provide one of the most accurately biting prescriptions for wellness – an unmercifully realistic case study.



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