

# The Portrayal of Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar

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## **Abstract**

The research portrays mental illness in literature through *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. Mental disorders have been a significant theme in literature, providing insights into the human mind and societal perceptions of mental wellbeing. The paper presents an emotional landscape, psychological challenges, and societal implications surrounding mental instability with a specific focus on how mental health issues are represented and explored in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* which puts forward the story of Esther Greenwood and her dream of becoming a famous poet, which is shattered by the deterioration of her mental health. The research contributes to a broader understanding of mental illness and its significance in depicting the complexities of the human experience. *The Bell Jar* reflects a profound impact on women and what it meant to be a woman in 1950s America. This intersection of psychology and literature thus offers a dual insight as psychology categorises and treats whereas literature humanises and expresses. The emotional realism of this narrative fosters empathy, challenges stigma, and creates a space for shared understanding.

**Keywords:** Literature, Mental Illness, Psychological approach, Empathy, Human experience.

## **Introduction**

Literature has played an important role in presenting mental health issues through different characters and stories. Many writers have shown characters struggling with conditions such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and emotional distress. Through these characters, literature explores the complexity of the human mind and emotions, helping readers to understand the challenges faced by people dealing with mental illness. In English literature, mental health is often shown through the personal experiences and internal conflicts of characters. Writers describe how emotional struggles can affect a person's thoughts, behaviour, relationships, and their daily life. These stories also reflect society's attitudes towards mental illness and show the discrimination that individuals may experience. At the same time, literature also highlights hope, resilience, and recovery. Many works encourage empathy, understanding, and the importance of seeking help during difficult times. By presenting realistic emotional experiences, literature allows readers to connect with the struggles of others and get a deeper understanding of mental health and the human conditions.

Madness was a major and widely explored theme in nineteenth-century literature. During this time, the study of psychology and ideas about mental health were beginning to develop, and writers played an important role in shaping society's understanding of these issues alongside scientists and philosophers. Although the term "madness" is now considered outdated, Victorian writers used it to describe a wide range of mental illnesses and emotional conditions. People suffering from such conditions, specially women, were often shown as isolated, weak, or cut off from society. In some cases, they were hidden

away or locked up, though the reasons behind this were often uncertain — whether it was for their own protection, for the safety of others, or because society viewed their behaviour as shameful. Nineteenth-century writers did not all present madness in the same way. Some focused on emotional and imaginative forms of suffering, known as Romantic madness, while others explored darker and more frightening aspects through Gothic madness.

### **The Bell Jar and mental illness**

The Bell Jar is a deeply moving novel that explores the experience of depression through the life of its main character, Esther Greenwood. Written by Sylvia Plath and published in 1963, the novel reflects many of the author's own struggles with mental illness. Plath had personally experienced severe depression and psychiatric treatment, which gives the story an authentic and emotional depth.

At the beginning of the novel, Esther is working as an intern at a fashion magazine in New York during her summer break. Although she is equipped with excitement and opportunity, she feels emotionally disconnected and is not able to enjoy herself. She often experiences sadness, exhaustion, and loneliness, even in crowded places. Esther realises that she has not truly felt happy since the death of her father when she was a child. Despite being academically successful and winning a scholarship to college, she constantly doubts herself and feels uncertain about her future.

“I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story.” (Plath 77)

The unsolvable dilemma is perfectly represented in a crucial scene of the novel, when Esther imagines a fig tree in front of herself, picturing all the various possible paths that she could or could not follow in her future. She starts accounting for all the things she cannot do and the first one is cooking: unlike the women she knew when she was younger, such as her mother, grandmother and college best friend Jody, she is unable to cook, and that is the first thing that makes her feel different from the feminine role she is supposed to play. Therefore, her inability may result in a metaphorical starvation, because she cannot feed herself or a man, she is unable to perform in a feminine way, so she does not have that option in her future (C. Smith 12).

Esther's condition becomes worse after two painful experiences. First, she is sexually assaulted at a party, and shortly after she learns that she has been rejected from a summer writing programme she wanted to attend. Losing this opportunity leaves her feeling hopeless and directionless. She plans to spend the summer writing a novel, but she is unable to focus or stay motivated. Gradually, she loses interest in the activities she once enjoyed and starts withdrawing from daily life. Her days become empty and repetitive, creating a sense of sadness, lack of motivation, and isolation. She even stops caring for herself, wearing the same clothes for weeks and neglecting basic hygiene because she feels there is no purpose in trying. Esther is hungry for a life that she cannot have being a mother and a wife meant being trapped in that role, unable to fulfil her personal ambitions, but dedicating herself to her career meant struggling to be socially accepted and being seen as defective for her whole life. In the world she lives in, these are two mutually exclusive choices, and this is the reason why she freezes in front of the fig tree and starves herself: there is no way of reconciling her femininity with her intellectual life in a male-dominated society and, no matter what fig she would choose, she knows that she has to live under this oppression anyways (De Villiers 9). In this regard, in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, the author wrote, “What is my life for and what am I going to do with it? I don't know and I'm afraid. I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And

why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited” (Plath 43).

As Esther’s depression deepens, she struggles with insomnia and begins seeing a psychiatrist, though she doubts that anyone can truly help her.

“To the person in *The Bell Jar*, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.” (Plath 244)

Throughout the novel, she frequently thinks about suicide and describes her attempts in a calm and detached way, showing how emotionally disconnected she has become from both herself and the people around her. Her distant relationship with her mother and lack of close emotional support increase her sense of loneliness and hopelessness.

“The silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence.”(18)

Eventually, Esther attempts suicide by taking an overdose and is admitted to a psychiatric hospital. At first, she finds it difficult to trust the doctors and treatment, but over time she slowly begins to recover with proper care and support.

“I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow.” (Plath 150)

The title of the novel, *The Bell Jar*, acts as a powerful metaphor for Esther’s depression. She describes it as being trapped under a glass bell jar filled with stale air, unable to escape her own thoughts and emotions. As her mental state improves, it feels as though *The Bell Jar* slowly lifts, allowing fresh air and hope back into her life.

“Wherever I sat — on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok — I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.” (Plath 191)

The novel realistically presents not only the symptoms of depression but also the many factors that may contribute to it. Esther’s unresolved grief over her father’s death, her weak emotional connection with her mother, her lack of close friendships, and her high expectations of herself and others all play a role in her decline. The story shows how depression can gradually worsen, especially after difficult life events.

### **Mental Illness which serves as a Metaphor**

One of the most powerful symbols in *The Bell Jar* is the image of the bell jar itself, which represents Esther Greenwood’s overwhelming sense of isolation and emotional suffocation. Rather than portraying depression only as a personal psychological condition, Sylvia Plath uses the bell jar as a metaphor for the alienation created by modern society. Esther feels trapped within an invisible barrier that separates her from the world around her, making meaningful connection and self-expression increasingly difficult. As Jacqueline Rose argues, Plath transforms the experience of mental illness into a broader critique of cultural and social realities (Rose 37). In this way, Esther’s psychological suffering reflects not only her internal struggles but also the existential loneliness experienced by individuals in a rapidly changing modern world.

### **Feminist perspective of Madness**

Esther’s psychological breakdown cannot be understood without considering the restrictive gender expectations imposed upon women during the 1950s. Society offers her only a limited range of acceptable identities, primarily centred on marriage, domestic responsibilities, or careers shaped by male authority. These rigid expectations leave little room for personal freedom or self-definition. Elaine Showalter describes this condition as a cultural process in which women’s identities are gradually suppressed through

social expectations (Showalter 201). Esther's refusal to accept these predetermined roles intensifies her emotional conflict, making her mental illness both a personal crisis and a silent form of resistance. Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that representations of female madness in literature often challenge patriarchal structures rather than merely depicting psychological collapse (Gilbert and Gubar 78). Through Esther's experience, Plath presents madness as both suffering and rebellion against oppressive social norms.

### **Narrative Technique**

Plath's narrative style closely reflects Esther's deteriorating mental condition. The novel frequently shifts between moments of sharp irony and profound despair, allowing readers to experience the instability of Esther's thoughts and emotions. The fragmented structure, disrupted chronology, and recurring dark imagery effectively mirror the confusion and disorientation associated with mental illness. According to Wagner-Martin, the form of the novel itself recreates Esther's psychological fragmentation, enabling readers to participate in her gradual emotional decline (Wagner-Martin 112). Consequently, the breakdown of the narrative structure becomes symbolic of the fragmentation of Esther's identity and sense of self.

### **Identity crisis**

In addition to exploring individual psychological distress, *The Bell Jar* offers a critical examination of modern society and its unrealistic expectations of success and fulfilment. Esther's experiences within the glamorous world of magazine publishing expose the emptiness behind ideals of achievement, beauty, and social status. Although modern society celebrates independence and ambition, it simultaneously pressures individuals to conform to conventional standards. Susan Bassnett argues that Plath reveals the false promises modern culture offers women by exposing the gap between social expectations and personal fulfilment (Bassnett 54). Within this context, Esther's mental illness symbolises a wider cultural crisis, illustrating how social pressures can contribute to feelings of alienation and loss of identity.

### **Psychiatry and Power**

The novel also raises important questions about psychiatric treatment and the authority of medical institutions during mid-twentieth-century America. Esther's distressing experiences with electroconvulsive therapy demonstrate how psychiatric practices often prioritise institutional control over genuine emotional healing. Rather than providing comfort or understanding, the medical system frequently treated her as an object of diagnosis rather than as an individual experiencing profound psychological pain. Abrams and Harpham observe that institutional authority often creates emotional distance through its impersonal and clinical approach (Abrams and Harpham 215). Plath uses Esther's encounters with psychiatric treatment to criticise a system that overlooks the human dimensions of mental illness, revealing how medical authority can reinforce feelings of alienation instead of promoting recovery. Before Sylvia Plath died by suicide at the age of 30, she had already gained recognition in literary circles for her remarkable writing. After her death, her work reached an even wider audience, as many readers connected deeply with the intense emotions, despair, loneliness and fascination with death expressed in her poetry. Critics and scholars came to see her as one of the most important and debated poets of the postwar period. Writer Joyce Carol Oates described Plath as "one of the most celebrated and controversial of postwar poets writing in English."

Plath's writing was highly autobiographical and portrayed her personal struggles, including her mental suffering, her difficult marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes, her complicated relationship with her parents, and her conflicted sense of identity. Her poems openly explored emotions that many writers of her time avoided discussing. Critic Margaret Rees observed that whether Plath wrote about nature or the limitations society placed on individuals, she removed all pretence and allowed her work to reveal deep fears, powerful emotions, and the hidden tensions beneath postwar American society.

“When I think of Sylvia Plath, I am in awe of her intelligence, her language, her wit, her consonantal music—her sheer gift, and what must have been her drive, as its guardian, possessor, possessee, to realise it.” Sharon Olds (2013).

Sylvia Plath was an American poet and novelist whose personal experiences strongly influenced her novel *The Bell Jar*. The story follows Esther Greenwood, an intelligent young college student who experiences a serious mental breakdown while working as an intern in New York during the 1950s. Many events in the novel closely reflect Plath's own life. Like Esther, Plath earned a prestigious opportunity to work as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York in 1953. During this period, she struggled deeply with mental health issues, especially depression, which the novel symbolises through the image of the “bell jar” — a feeling of being trapped, isolated, and unable to connect with the world around her. After returning home from the internship, Plath suffered a severe emotional breakdown and attempted suicide by taking sleeping pills. She later underwent electroshock therapy as part of her treatment. These experiences are portrayed in the novel almost exactly as they happened in her real life, making *The Bell Jar* a powerful semi-autobiographical work about mental illness, identity, and emotional suffering.

Some critics have questioned the continuing fascination with Sylvia Plath's death and her struggles with mental illness. In the book *Reading America*, Irish critic Denis Donoghue argued that Plath's suicide was often used for a troubling romantic purpose. He believed that many people began to treat suffering, emotional breakdown, and self-destruction as signs of artistic truth and authenticity. According to Donoghue, society started glorifying pain and despair, while normalcy and mental stability were viewed as less meaningful or even shameful.

In a similar way, American poet and critic Maggie Nelson discussed Plath in her book *The Art of Cruelty*. Nelson explained that Plath, like photographer Diane Arbus, was often reduced to a narrow image of either a fearless rebel or a self-destructive narcissist. She suggested that Plath's identity had become heavily tied to tragedy and emotional suffering, to the point that being compared to Sylvia Plath is often seen in a negative way.

### **The parallels between *The Bell Jar* and Plath's life**

The similarities between *The Bell Jar* and the life of Sylvia Plath have long been debated by critics and readers. Many people believe that the novel feels so authentic because it provides a deep insight into Plath's own thoughts, emotions, and psychological struggles. As a result, readers often focus not only on the protagonist Esther Greenwood, but also on Plath herself while interpreting the story.

Over the years, critics have tried to connect Plath's real-life experiences with Esther's character, especially in terms of feminism, mental illness, and personal suffering. Some observers have even suggested that Plath's struggles were intensified by the oppressive attitudes of a patriarchal society and by her difficult relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes. According to this view, Plath lived in a 1950s American society where women faced strict social expectations, making it difficult for ambitious and independent women to fully succeed without emotional conflict.

Although Plath later became celebrated as an important early feminist writer, her tragic death also reflects the pressures and limitations women experienced during that era. Her struggles with mental illness are clearly reflected in *The Bell Jar*, which closely mirrors parts of her own life. However, the novel does not directly present Esther as either a heroic victim or a martyr. Instead of blaming patriarchy, society, or Esther herself entirely for her suffering, the novel offers criticism of all these aspects to some extent. At the centre of Esther's suffering is a disturbing and undefined mental illness that deeply affects her sense of identity and reality. Rather than giving a simple explanation for Esther's condition, the novel leaves room for readers to interpret the meaning of her illness in different literary and psychological ways

### Conclusion

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* continues to be regarded as one of the most significant literary portrayals of mental illness in modern literature. Through the experiences of Esther Greenwood, Plath demonstrates that mental illness cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological condition. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of emotional distress, restrictive gender roles, and the pressures imposed by society. The recurring image of the bell jar effectively symbolises Esther's feelings of isolation and helplessness, reflecting both her internal struggle with depression and the broader sense of alienation produced by modern social life.

This study has shown that Plath presents mental illness from multiple perspectives. At the personal level, the novel offers a sensitive portrayal of Esther's emotional breakdown and her search for identity. At the same time, it critiques the patriarchal values, unrealistic expectations of success, and institutional systems that contribute to her suffering. By connecting Esther's psychological experiences with larger social and cultural forces, Plath suggests that mental illness is not simply a private experience but also a reflection of the inequalities and pressures embedded within society. As a result, *The Bell Jar* remains a powerful literary work that deepens our understanding of the relationship between mental health, identity, and the social environment.

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