

Sylvia Plath as Feminist Writer
Intisar R. Khalil

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" 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"

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, P.66

ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is a twentieth-century feminist poetess and novelist. She expresses a feminist point of view in her writing. **The Bell Jar** (1963) shows how women in the 1950s were treated as the inferior and subordinate sex. This led to a lack of openings for them to break free of this idea, and women became frustrated at the roles that they were restricted to and forced to fill, such as wives and mothers, rather than being allowed to follow their dreams as men were. Plath is against this conventional idea; she calls for equality.

The present study is divided into three sections and a conclusion. Section one presents the life of Sylvia Plath. Section two sheds light on the concept of modern feminism. The last section deals with Plath's attitude to women's real identity in male-dominated society, and to the concept of marriage and sex. Then, follows the conclusion which sums up the findings of the research.

1.1 Sylvia Plath's Life

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is an American poet and novelist. She was born in Boston, Massachusetts, Plath was educated at Smith College and at the University of Cambridge, where she was a Fulbright scholar. Her father Otto was a professor of Biology at Boston University, and had specialized in bees. Her mother was Aurelia ⁽¹⁾. It is quite significant to concentrate on the relationship between Sylvia and her mother, since Sylvia reveals her hatred for her mother in all her works especially *The Bell Jar*. She portrayed her mother, Mrs. Prouty unsympathetically. Plath later tried to convince her mother that she fictionized "to add color"⁽²⁾ and "to show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown."⁽³⁾ Plath hates her mother because she does not feel that her mother mourned her father's death. Aurelia explains, "I had vividly remembered a time when I was a little child, seeing my mother weep in my presence and feeling that my whole personal world was collapsing" ⁽⁴⁾ Aurelia is aware of Sylvia's anger, she notices that her daughter did not understand her mother's attempt to hide her sadness, to protect Sylvia's internal world.

In *Letter's Home*, Aurelia defended herself, she said little but what she did say was significant. She explained how she sacrificed for Sylvia, she gave up her teaching post after she married Otto, her husband was obliged to do so. He wanted her to become "full-time home-maker"⁽⁵⁾ In addition, Aurelia was moving from place to place with her husband when he was busy with his book. Otto did not give enough attention to his family, because of his superior attention and his long years of living in college dormitories. All this made him careless towards his family responsibility.⁽⁶⁾ Aurelia

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started a new life with a new job after Otto's death to offer good future to her daughter, and that is what really was done when Sylvia got a scholarship from Wellesley College.⁽⁷⁾ She stated that "what I intended as an exercise in courage for the sake of my children was interpreted years later by daughter as indifference."⁽⁸⁾

Sylvia wrote her first poem when she was only eight years old; she was a genius and smart in conveying the images and themes of her ideas. She was according to Robert Lowell, "hardly, a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess', but one of those suppreal, hypnotic, great classical heroines".⁽⁹⁾ Sylvia expresses her feelings and thoughts to be a writer when she was eighteen years old in one of the first entries in her journal written in the summer of 1950.

*I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think,
as a stamp collector loves his collection.
Every story, every incident, every bit of
conversation is raw material for me. My love
is not impersonal, yet everyone wholly
subjective either. I would like to be everyone,
a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then
come back to write about my thought, my
emotions as that person.*⁽¹⁰⁾

Then in the next entry, she expresses her need to live happily in the present "I don't want to die."⁽¹¹⁾ What is important here is the counter desires of Sylvia. She wants to be everyone, she wants to experience life to the full, she feels struggle and unstable life.⁽¹²⁾ Sylvia concentrates in all her works on her life, all her works are autobiographical. Plath wrote in a highly individualistic way, she weaves the themes and images of self-destruction together.

Women's autobiographical writings always stand for security, since autobiography demanded confidence and determined self, in which the writer "confronts specific forms and difference but nevertheless suggests a self which is clearly defined".⁽¹³⁾

Plath's works deal with alienation, death and self destruction. She started her literary careers with , *The Colossus* (1960). *The Bell Jar* (1963), a novel she published under pseudonym "Victoria Lucas" , then appeared under her own name in (1966)⁽¹⁴⁾. *Ariel* (1965) contains her late poems which most often criticized, and most completed poems. Actually, she wrote them before the years of her suicide.⁽¹⁵⁾ Then *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1972), which got the interest of poets and critics. *Johnny Pannic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977) contains prose and short stories. Finally, *The Collected poems* (1981) which was published by her husband, English poet Ted Hughes.⁽¹⁶⁾

1.2 Plath & Feminism

The feminist movement started with the first Woman's Rights Convention which was held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.⁽¹⁷⁾ Though the convention called for the equality between men and women in all the aspects of life; yet there was no real interest in that right as it earlier in modern century. Betty Freidan's book *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), was the starting point with the modern feminist movement. Freidan concentrates on the lack of awareness of million American suburban housewives with their real problems. In the fifties, the women felt that there was something wrong with her life, but she lacked the awareness to specify that problem. She felt that her life as a housewife was not fulfilling.⁽¹⁸⁾

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Marriage was as a passport to a perfect woman. The girls joined college just to find suitable husbands instead of getting education. At that time education was seen as a bar to marriage. Freidan stated that the average age of marriage had fallen to 20. At the fifties, woman believed that her life could not be glorified without husband and children. Therefore women insisted on having more children; people before had two children, they were now having four, five, six or more.⁽¹⁹⁾ Sheryl Meyering agrees Freidan, that the women of the 1950s have intense desire to be accepted by men and eventually marry and have children. The desire was purely a product of the constrictive 1950s social mentality.⁽²⁰⁾ Meyering added that even Sylvia Plath has that desire to be a wife and a mother within her deeper self through her writing. In 1953, at the age twenty, Plath wrote in her journal:-

*I must find a strong potential powerful mate
who can counter my vibrant dynamic self:
sexual and intellectual, and while comradely,
I must admire him: respect and admiration
must equate with the object of my love (that is
where the remnants of paternal, godlike
qualities come in.)⁽²¹⁾*

Plath was searching for equality, she needed suitable male to participate him in all the aspects of life. She searches for a special one who would not bind her into a woman, she did not want to be: she would be a wife and she would write as well. Freidan objected the state of women; they were interested in their appearance to appeal to men. They were holding mostly part-time jobs with low rates, to help their husbands and to support their families.⁽²²⁾

Sylvia Plath in ***The Bell Jar*** calls for equality. What makes this novel a feminist text of its time is that there were few literary works about female characters during the fifties. ***The Bell Jar*** is an attempt to write sympathetically about the state of American women during the fifties, to shed light on the difficulties which face women in the male dominated society, and women's struggle to prove their identities as women. Recognizing that modern women faced difficult decisions about their own and their family life was at this time a feminist realization in itself, as women were not supposed to be smart as men were.

1.3 The Bell Jar as a Feminist Text

1.3.1 Search for Identity

In society, women in the past and even in the present have suffered some form of oppression due to their female identity and the patriarchal world in which they lived. Therefore, Sylvia Plath presents her autobiographical novel ***The Bell Jar*** to reflect the social and cultural oppression upon the American women in the fifties. Plath presents a feminist text, centered around a young woman who fights to prove her identity and to achieve her dreams and goals in sexist society. The Society which is enformed for men and leads Esther to suffer from psychological struggle, then her attempts suicide. The summer Esther spent in New York presented a flashback to the discrimination and cultural forces that have oppressed women in the world of 1950.⁽²³⁾

The prize Esther won in the fashion magazine contest meant working as a guest editor for one of fashion show magazines whose purpose was to show the ideal feminine image. Esther:

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*was supposed to be the envy of the thousand of
other college girls just like (her) all over
America who wanted nothing more than to be
tripping about in those same size, seven patent
leather shoes ... drinking martinis in a skimpy,
imitation silver lame bodice ... in the company
of several anonymous young men with all
American bone structures* ⁽²⁴⁾

There were "... piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets ... and hair stylings ... and advice about what to do with their particular complexion ..." ⁽²⁵⁾. Plath describes the lives that young women expected to live in the years before marriage through her description to the Amazon the hotel where she stayed with her friends. The hotel "... was for women only ... mostly girls ... with wealthy parents ..." ⁽²⁶⁾ They were "... all going to posh secretarial schools where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated ... and were simply hanging around New York waiting to get married." ⁽²⁷⁾ Esther criticizes those girls who accept the job of being the secretary, or assistant instead of being independent women with independent jobs. The women of the 1950s lack the awareness, they don't have the ability to search for supreme career. Esther is unsure of what she would like her career to be, but she is sure that it will not have anything to do with a male overpowering her. This is important because this describes Esther's drive to be something more than a secretary or assistant. She hates the thought of being in control of a man who will use her to do this menial labor. She even criticizes the magazine which awarded her and 11 other girls a free trip to New York. She now knows well that the magazine is clearly not interesting in promoting the girl's intellect that won them the contest in the first place. It is no wonder

Esther becomes weary of this stale, unprofitable environment which only stifles her personal growth. She discovers that her real place is not among those girls, she has nothing to do with them, therefore she says:

*I guess I should have been excited the way
most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get
myself to react. 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.⁽²⁸⁾*

Before Esther went to New York, her life was safely circumscribed. She was always full of dreams and whose life is lightning with hopes and opportunities. During that fateful summer in the city questions suddenly confronted her: what does being a woman mean? What female role should she play? Here is a clear development of Esther's personality; she is aware of her real needs and her real role is her society.

The Bell Jar presents a variety of traditional female roles: Doreen, a beautiful girl who takes care of her look, to deduce men and trap them; Esther's mother, the woman who interests in financial concerns; Dodo Conway, a Catholic pregnant woman on her seventh child whose face glows with a serene ; Besty, the innocent and normal girl; Philomena Guinea, the old writer and the financial baker of Esther's scholarship; Jay Cee, Esther's boss and the most successful magazine editor; Buddy Willard's mother, a professor's wife who always quotes words of wisdom to advice the citizens. Actually, despite Doreen's beauty, Dodo's innocence and purity, Jay's cleverness and Mrs. Willard's wisdom, all are unperfect

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women.⁽²⁹⁾ It is impossible for all those women to assert their personality and independence, to prove their own identity as independent women, they even cannot stand on solid ground without the assistance of men. Life style of those women do not satisfy Esther's ambitions.

Esther wants to be a poet and writer, but people close to her, don't accept her talents to be so. They even try to push her into traditionally more feminine roles. For example, Esther's mother repeatedly tries to direct her to simple and practical job like learning shorthand, but Esther rebels, saying "... when I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down a line of shorthand, my mind went blank." ⁽³⁰⁾ Esther, unlike many women of her time, refuses to be controlled by sexist society which always pulls women to behind and delays them from development and progress. Therefore Esther confronts her mother: "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoot off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket." ⁽³¹⁾. The phrase "infinite security" and " the place an arrow shoots off from" come from Mrs. Willard's description of the women's role in society; the others consider her woman of wisdom. This passage directly addresses Plath's central purpose in the novel; the others consider her woman of wisdom which is to look at the mental problems that can be full of women with ambitions that the surrounding culture will not allow her to fulfill.

Esther is against the conventional attitude of what a woman's place in society is and expresses her conflicting emotions running through Esther's mind, and shows a vision of her life branching out like a green fig tree:

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 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 set there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go back, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. ⁽³²⁾

Society had convinced Esther that a woman has only one choice, and Esther could not decide so she was left with nothing. The only acceptable purpose for a woman was to be a wife and mother, but Esther's inner spirit could not have been content with this kind of existence. Plath, encourages women to find other choices unlike those ones their society offers, and to find their real identity instead of staying as subordinate citizens in their male-dominated society.

1.3.2 Marriage and Sex

Esther tells us her views on the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, motherhood, and the kind of career that is considered practical. She shows the concept of sexuality with double standards according to her society's point of view. An article written by a married woman lawyer with children and called "In

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Defence of Chastity"⁽³³⁾ was mailed to Esther at college by her mother. According to Esther, "... the main point of the article was that a man's world is different from a woman's world ... and the best men wanted to be pure for their wives and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex ... ⁽³⁴⁾. During that summer, all the men in Esther's life were the personification of the double standard. Those men divided women into two simplified categories, the sluts and the virgins. Marco attempted to rape Esther, whom he deemed a slut, because he was in love with his first cousin (who was) going to be a nun. The women he loved and the women he slept with were Erick's classifications. He informed Esther that "he'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free from all that dirty business." ⁽³⁵⁾

Esther's boyfriend, Buddy was a typical example of the double standard. Everyone had told her "What a fine clean boy Buddy Willard was" ⁽³⁶⁾, when all the time he had been having an affair with that tarty waitress."⁽³⁷⁾ He believed that Esther's literary aspirations were merely a phase and once they married, she would be content to be nothing more than Mrs. Buddy Willard. He restricted the role of women as a housewife only. That reflects his restricted thinking and discrimination of the talents of women. Actually, Buddy's definition of the ideal wife stemmed from observing his own parent's marriage. The philosophy of their marriage was symbolized in Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat. The rug was at once time a beautiful pattern of "tweedy browns and greens and blues."⁽³⁸⁾ Until she used it a kitchen mat, "solid and dull and indisting usable from any mat you can buy for under a dollar in five and ten. ⁽³⁹⁾ Mrs. Willard was just like her mat because after the wedding to Mr. Willard, she was flattened out underneath his feet.

In her role as the wife of a university professor, "cook and clean and wash was just what Mrs. Willard did from morning till night."⁽⁴⁰⁾

Esther sees her society as a jungle for those who could not fit the perfect standard of marriage. A women's appearance had to meet certain standards in order to receive a man's recognition, making women more objects than individuals. The ideal look for women at that time was being blonde and slim, like Marilyn Monroe, the symbol of attractiveness of the fifties.⁽⁴¹⁾ This was evident in the way Doreen spoke about her boss. She had told Esther, "Jay Cee's ugly as sin ... I bet that old husbands of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he'd puke otherwise ..." ⁽⁴²⁾ Women were also expected to have traditional feminine interests and abilities, like cooking, sewing and shorthand. Esther's mother attempted to force this vision of the ideal woman onto her daughter from childhood and reaching a culmination in that fatal summer. Esther's mother teaches a shorthand course and has always encouraged her to learn it as a necessary skill, but Esther had a mental block and refuses to take it. This is because she does not want to have the requirements of a practical woman. She rejects the passive femininity of her mother and her friends. Esther's entire affiliation of what a woman should not be in many ways a perfect picture of her mother. Her mother is the pure woman who married her husband, had children and then used her practical skill of shorthand as a source of income. Esther will look at her as an example of a life she wants to leave behind, while she goes and explores her own destiny. She has enough energy and determined self to choose new different future. ⁽⁴³⁾

The Bell Jar presents negative images of childhood. In a gynecologist's office, seeing a mother lovingly caressing her baby. Esther wonders why she does not feel these same maternal

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sensations, as biological and social roles suggest. This scene arise inner conflict inside her. To her babies represent life, but not the life she wants to live. She does not want fulfillment through childbirth, as many women would; she wants to fulfill herself, by herself, with no help from any body. Esther strives all the time to prove her courage as an independent woman who can achieve her dreams without the assistance of anybody. Between the enormous fetuses on display at Buddy's hospital ward and her neighbour. Dodo Conway, as a pregnant slave to her seven children, Esther feels overwhelmed, even sickened. The image of Dodo with her child brings to Esther all the scattered feelings of female responsibility to the climax. Babies lure Esther toward suiciding by presenting to her only two options: either giving oneself completely to the child or dying. The choice to live looms visibly and painfully that she takes matter into her own hands by attempting to kill herself later on.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Esther realizes that her feeling towards motherhood is different from the traditional happy wife and mother, whose life revolves around her husband and children. Esther doesn't want to be the person who gives all the time, the sacrificed person who endures to give happiness to others. She makes the point about the male doctors giving the woman in labor a drug that will make her forget about the pain, so she will go home and start another baby. This shows Esther's cynical view of males and their selfish outlook on life. Esther refuses Dodo Conway and her many children it is disgusting and she clearly states that children make her sick. She does not this kind of monotonous life, but to pursue her own life and career. She also witnesses childbirth in the hospital where Buddy works. She describes the pain of woman and the selfishness of men during this process.

The woman's stomach stuck up so high, I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups and all the time the body was being born she never stopped making this inhuman whooming noise.

The head doctor... kept saying to the woman, "push down, Mrs. Tomolillo, push down, that's a good girl, push down", and finally through the split, shaven place between her legs, lurid with disinfectant, I saw a dark fuzzy thing appear. ⁽⁴⁵⁾

In this scene, Esther feels a scared because childbirth seems like a frightening ordeal, in which the "dark fuzzy thing" emerges from between the woman's legs. She feels the pain of Mrs. Tonollio and that is quite apparent with her "spider-fat stomach", "ugly, spindly legs", and "inhuman whooming noise". The child itself is streaked with blood and "blue as a plumb". It is like a foreign object that violates the mother's body. After observing the "sewing up of the woman's cut with a needle and long thread", Esther wonders "if there were any other ways to have babies". ⁽⁴⁶⁾ She is very upset now, she realizes that the bait of that dangerous pain was the sex.

Esther was not prepared to deal with marriage and children. She refuses the idea of marriage; through most parts of the novel, she assures this idea. She says "I never intended to get married, even though Buddy Willard was interested. However, Buddy tells her that

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he loses his interest, and Esther reflects on a past conversation about marriage just before being released: "I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther. Now you've been here". And of course I didn't know who would marry me now that I'd been where I had been. I didn't know at all." ⁽⁴⁷⁾ Her view is not one of the definition, as it was previously. She's not dead against marriage; now it's just the idea of someone not waiting to marry her because of her mental breakdown.

Concerning the dilemma of remaining a virgin, Esther left the sex matter, she decided to leave it behind. There was no benefit to have sex. She didn't see the point in losing her virginity especially after she finds out that Buddy had an affair. Esther didn't see the point in losing her virginity. After all, she was not planning on getting married or having any kids, so, why having sex just to say "I 'm not a virgin?" Although, the stigma of Esther's attempted suicide and hospitalization seems to free Esther from this less traditional behavior. She becomes defiant, rejecting her previous morals, and loses her virginity to a man she met on the stairs of Havard's winder library. That reflects Esther's internal conflict towards the external social expression.

This was how Esther visualized the concept of sex and marriage. In the summer she spent in New York city, Esther found herself in a world of unrealistic expectations for woman concerning careers, childbearing, sex and marriage. Through the opportunities provided to her, the men in her life, her mother and her experiences, society attempted to mold the young Esther Greenwood into a prisoner living in the bell Jar named " an American woman".

Conclusions

The Bell Jar is a symbol for the internal chaos and despair produced by the external obstacles, oppressions and prohibitions. Plath shows us the discrimination against women at the fifties. Through this, she conveys a message to the society to be aware of the idea, that actions such as this are dangerous and can lead to face shocked fates, such as Esther's mental breakdown then committing suicide. Actually, the central purpose of **The Bell Jar** is the feminist point of view which insists to keep this idea in the minds of all readers. Plath struggles and call for equality. She sends a message to the young girls to find the strength to prove themselves as an independent women listening to their hearts and following their dreams. She awares them of their hopeless traditional states, they may find themselves lost, prisoners, confused and isolated from the world. And society must encourage women to choose the future that best fits who they are, not dictate to them the image they must fit. Each woman has the fundamental right to choose her own destiny.

Notes

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30. *The Bell Jar*, P. 100.
31. Ibid, P.68.
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38. Ibid, P.69.
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