



Esther Greenwood as the 'Mad Woman': The Connection between Patriarchy, Femininity and Stigmatized Female Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Esther Greenwood mint az „őrült nő”: A kapcsolat a patriarchátus, a nőiesség és a megbélyegzett női mentális betegségek között Sylvia Plath *Az üvegbúra* című művében.

Absztrakt: A cikk központi témája Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar* [Az üvegbúra] című műve, amely rávilágít olyan rendszerszintű problémákra és ideológiákra, amelyek meghatározták az 1950-es és 1960-as évek amerikai társadalmát, hozzájárulva a nemek közti egyenlőtlenséghez. A regény által körbejárt társadalmi problémák nagy része még ma is jelen van a nyugati kultúrákban, ezért a mű nem csak szubjektív, de univerzális női tapasztalat ábrázolásaként is értelmezhető. Plath hősnője, Esther Greenwood útja szorongáson, depresszió, öngyilkossági kísérleten és sokterápián át vezet a gyógyuláshoz. A regény részletesen bemutatja azt, hogy melyek azok az őt körülvevő tényezők, melyek negatívan hatnak mentális egészségére. A cikk célja, hogy Esther történetét elemezve körbejárja a női szexualitást, önrendelkezést és mentális betegségeket megbélyegző, egyenlőtlen rendszert fenntartó világszemléletet, ezáltal rámutatva a mentális betegségek és a társadalmi elnyomás közötti kapcsolatra.

Abstract

This article argues that Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* highlights systemic problems and ideologies that defined American society in the 1950s and 1960s, contributing to gender inequality. Many of the social issues that the novel explores are still present in Western cultures today, and therefore the work can be understood as the representation of not only subjective, but a universal female experience. The journey of Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, leads through anxiety, depression, a suicide attempt and shock therapy to her recovery. The novel details the surrounding factors that negatively affect her mental health. The aim of the article is to analyze Esther's story by examining the ideals that perpetuate an unequal system that stigmatizes female sexuality, self-determination and mental illness, and dismisses female experience, thereby highlighting the link between mental illness and social oppression.

Introduction

Although Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*, is semi-autobiographical and set in 1950s America, its criticism, conveyed by the delicate psychological portrayal of Esther Greenwood's journey through anxiety, depression, suicide, and a consequent recovery, remains relevant more than half a century later. Similarly to the literary precedent, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Plath highlights many factors that are the sources of women's inequality and contribute to their declining mental health. Topics such as sexual harassment and misconduct, the unequal representation and wages of the sexes, the choice between a career and family life, and the constant dismissal of female experiences, which reinforce the 'mad woman' narrative, are still

relevant to contemporary readers due to the systemic problems that are deeply rooted in the social order of western cultures and are shown also in Plath's novel. A common perception of the patriarchal society, as Plath's protagonist, Esther, mentions, is that "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (Plath, 1963, 86). Esther's anxiety, however, stems from the fact that despite social pressure, she does not want to be the place the arrow shoots off from and live a restricted life. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to prove that Esther Greenwood sees suicide as a possible rebirth from the patriarchal society's constraining expectations that simultaneously cause and stigmatize her psychological distress.

After providing a historical and cultural context, I will examine the feminine ideals of post-war society and argue that even though it is indisputably based on Plath's own experience, *The Bell Jar* focuses on understanding the systematic problems and power relations that are behind her personal experience. I will proceed with the analysis of the novel, beginning with the male gaze, society's fixation on premarital virginity, the double standard between the sexes, and the chauvinist perception of female sexual autonomy. The second half of the article is centered around Esther's liminal state between femininity and an artistic career, as well as her later recovery that leaves her fate open by the ominous ending of the novel, which suggests that the bell jar could descend once again.

Women's Roles and Feminine Ideals in Post-War America

The post-World War II period was a turbulent time for American society. The industry stopped producing war equipment and started to manufacture consumer goods instead, which marked the beginning of the consumerist society and brought about unprecedented prosperity. However, the changes did not only affect the economy but also had a major impact on the American social order: society enjoyed and increased consumption, which centered mostly around the households (Birmingham Feminist History Group, 2005, 6), the value of family and child-rearing became a priority, and the role of women was reassessed. This section will examine the historical background of women's roles and the feminine ideals of the 1950s and 1960s America.

The lack of men in the labor market due to the events of World War II brought about a drastic change in the power relations between the sexes because "the pool of available male workers rapidly declined, as nearly 14 million men entered the armed forces" (Morantz-Sanchez, 1987, 676). Consequently, a significant number of women had to enter a previously exclusively masculine space and that "made boundaries between men's and women's work more permeable" (Morantz-Sanchez, 1987, 675). The traditional biases concerning women's roles and places changed, and the modern woman's predecessor was born, fulfilling the roles of a mother and a worker at the same time. This change raised a variety of new issues, which can also be observed by the fears

of female substitution “prompting male workers to exhibit a willingness to ally with women to guarantee equal wages to both” (Morantz-Sanchez, 1987, 676). This situation, however, lasted only until the end of the war, after which “most women were forced back into traditionally female occupations” or “pushed out of the labor market entirely” (Morantz-Sanchez, 1987, 676). Post-war economic growth brought about an optimistic public sentiment, and society turned once again towards the family and children. Women were pressured to return to the domestic sphere and retreat from the labor market. As the Birmingham Feminist History Group put it, “The notion of separate spheres is by no means new [...] but the conditions in which it appears in the fifties are quite specific” (2005, 8) because by that time it became apparent that women were just as fit as men to fulfill certain (undomestic) roles.

Betty Friedan's revolutionary book, *The Feminine Mystique*, has articulated “the problem that has no name” and addressed the boredom and unfulfilling lives of post-war American housewives. According to Friedan, “In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (1963, 6). Most of the mentioned feminine fulfillment consisted of fulfilling the classic domestic roles: motherhood, taking care of the house, and satisfying the husband. The 50s and 60s brought about a regression in terms of women's equality, as women were thought to possess something that men lacked: a special kind of intuition, tenderness, and a capacity for love. According to the Birmingham Feminist History Group (2005, 8), “Ideologies about women in the fifties are underpinned by the notion of ‘equal but different’ – men and women have their special spheres, and women bring different [...] qualities, to the society that men could not provide”. It became “impossible to imagine women not wanting to be wives and mothers, since that is the area in which they can find themselves” (Friedan, 1963, 5). It is precisely the idea of being “equal but different” that created the notion of the ideal housewife who has “found true feminine fulfillment” and was “respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world” (Friedan, 1963, 5). It created undoubtedly a contradictory situation: the contemporary society valued and emphasized the differences between the sexes, “labeling women as emotional, intuitive and imaginative, while jealously converting reason and rationality into an exclusively male preserve” (Moi, 1985, 123), forgetting the similarities, and thus, true equality. Marriage, again, became an institution, involving “an exchange of the female's domestic service [...] in return for financial support” (Millet, 2016, 35).

Consequently, although women and men were equal in theory, society's fixation on the feminine ideal put pressure on women to remain in the domestic sphere. According to Friedan, most women “were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights” (1963, 5). It was decided by society that women become wives and mothers, evading the “choices

that would have given them a personal purpose, a sense of their own being” in the “name of femininity” (Friedan, 1963, 253). It is this external pressure that causes Esther Greenwood’s anxiety in *The Bell Jar*, as Esther despairs of traditional femininity, but “no other road to fulfillment was offered to American women in the middle of the twentieth century” (Friedan, 1963, 52).

Femininity Through the Lens of the Male Gaze: The Purity Myth and Sexualization of Women in *The Bell Jar*

The novel begins with Esther’s time in New York working at a women’s magazine called *Ladies’ Day*. Esther, as a young college student, is in the process of searching for an identity, being sensitive to external influences in a rather superficial metropolitan setting that presents often contradictory messages. Sexuality and its unconstrained exploration were controversial issues in post-war America: the sexualization of young women contradicted but co-existed with the cult of virginity. For young women, the discovery of their own sexuality was either closely interrelated with childbearing, approved socially only after marriage, or with extreme sexualization.

The theory of the male gaze originates from feminist film theory and has been translated into literary texts (Skomp, 2003, 137). Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, states that the target audience of the 20th-century media is male (1975, 11); therefore, women are mostly portrayed from the perspective of a man or a male character (Espinosa, 2021, 8) and are more likely “to be shown as sexual objects or in a sexually explicit way.” Mulvey differentiated “three aspects of the male gaze” (1975, 8) from which “the second is the gaze of men within the narrative” (Skomp, 2003, 137), which can also appear in a text written by a woman. Kate Millett argues in *Sexual Politics* that “a great quantity of guilt and shame attached to sexuality is placed upon the female”, while the female sex is the one which is primarily assessed based on outward characteristics, desirability and appropriate behavior (1970, 54). In the novel, Esther comes across an article, titled “In Defense of Chastity,” which explains in detail that some men would persuade a girl to have sex, even though they would lose all respect for her as soon as she gave in (Plath, 1963, 40). The idea of preserving virginity until marriage was connected to being seen as beautiful and desirable, but not in a sexual way.

On the other hand, expressing and experiencing sexuality freely was considered improper, as an act that devalues women. For Esther, her friends Dodo and Betsy are the embodiments of what would happen to her if she submitted to the status quo. She describes Dodo and her husband’s life as “the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood” (Plath, 1963, 76). Another time she fantasizes about a similar future in which she “might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway” (Plath, 1963, 87). Both Betsy and Dodo seem to identify with the role of a housewife; they live their lives in alignment with the status quo,

deprived of their autonomous sexuality, representing the woman fit for marriage. Doreen, however, is the object of the male desire that “projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1975, 19). She is a lively, flirtatious girl with looser morals, with whom Esther feels a strong connection from the beginning. To Esther, Doreen represents the ‘what if’, the temptation, and symbolizes everything Esther thinks she desires to be. However, whenever Esther spends time with her, she feels filthy at the end, and her opinion changes when Doreen comes home from her lover drunk and sick. Esther, in utter disgust and disillusionment, decides to leave her alone, on the floor “lying there in the pool of vomit like an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature” (Plath, 1963, 13). Esther quickly adds that “It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (Plath, 1963, 13).

In the novel, a passage, which details the misogynistic attitude of a boy named Eric, unveils the root of Esther’s decision described in the previous paragraph, and highlights how differently female and male sexuality is perceived: “It would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he loved anybody, he would never go to bed with her” (Plath, 1963, 40). On the other hand, books on sex education and marriage manuals all stressed that sex within marriage was pleasurable and finally guilt-free (Birmingham Feminist History Group, 2005, 17), further imbedding the idea that sexual autonomy, at least for women, is possible only within the institution of marriage. Buddy Willard’s behavior also illustrates the deep-running contradictory approach towards the two sexes: while he is dating Esther, with the prospect of a future marriage, he has sex with another woman, which he does not find objectionable at all. Moreover, the reaction of women to Buddy’s behavior is that “most boys were like that” (Plath, 1963, 35), which suggests internalized sexism. This outer pressure, and Buddy’s corruption causes Esther’s ambivalent approach to her virginity, which “weighed like a millstone around” her neck (Plath, 1963, 228). When she loses her virginity, the result is “severe hemorrhage, [...] a bloody wound emblematic of the spirit in which Irwin has made love to her – a spirit not of tenderness but of all-out war” (Perloff, 1972, 517). While intended as an act of liberation and rebellion, it is a violent experience because the pressure Esther felt polarized the whole issue: seeing the world divided over the question of virginity, it also omitted pleasure from the discourse. The sexual act she engages in is “lacking (female) sexuality, eroticism, and desire” (Séleli, 2003, 145).

Esther is torn by the illusion of having to choose between two extremes: she finds it disturbing that a woman must “have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (Plath, 1963, 81). She starts feeling detached from her life and self in New York, suffers from the inner conflict of feeling alienated and horrified, but still pressured, and this liminal state of insecurity is taking its toll on her sanity. As Marjorie G. Perloff states, “her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject” (1972, 511).

As we could see, the novel's portrayal of Esther's struggle to navigate society's contradictory expectations regarding femininity and sexuality mimics the reality of mid-20th century America. Plath draws attention to the fact that the mid-20th century American woman was "still denied sexual freedom and the biological control over her body" (Millet, 2016, 54). As Esther feels pressured to identify with the status quo, her anxiety turns into depression by the time her internship ends, and she moves back to Boston.

Esther's Broken Sense of Self as the Obstacle of a Creative Life

In *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf argues that "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (2021), done in order to reach the full potential of the creative self. The inner conflict of Esther comes from the same source that Woolf alludes to: motherhood is not only in conflict with a creative career but is also its potential end. As Plath guides the reader through Esther's anxious state of mind, a girl with a broken sense of self emerges, stuck in the liminal state between submitting to and abandoning the status quo, paralyzed by the need to decide. For Esther, who lacks female role models, femininity and a creative career are not compatible. This inner conflict is not unknown among female creators, who "try to kill 'the angel,' but in so doing they are forced to negate their femininity in both social and biological terms and to assimilate into male subjectivity" (Sakane, 1998, 31). This section argues that to discover her individuality and within that, her femininity, Esther must begin with the "deconstruction of the concepts of womanhood that have been socially established and ideologically internalized within women's psyches" (Sakane, 1998, 27), and only after that can Esther establish her true artistic self. Esther is stuck in the transitional state between girlhood and womanhood as well as femininity and a creative career, because she fails to find role models and defines herself based on the characteristics of the females she cannot identify with. She resents Betsy and Dodo for identifying with the female ideal of the time, but at the same time distances herself from the nonconformist Doreen. She sees her own mother succumbed to the patriarchy, but while she wishes she had a mother like Jay Cee, the successful editor of *Ladies' Day*, she does not consider her a role model, either, because she fails "to recognize that a successful and intelligent woman can be a sexual being at the same time" (Sakane, 1998, 32).

The fig tree metaphor also expresses Esther's frustration with the lack of multiple simultaneous life paths society offers: she compares her life to a green fig tree, with every "at purple fig" hanging from the branches representing a possible future (Plath, 1963, 39). For Esther, one fig is a married life with children; the other is the future as a famous poet; another is a career as a successful editor (Plath, 1963, 39), and so on. Each fig represents an opportunity she could seize. Esther, however, feels paralyzed by wanting "each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest" and

seeing them begin “to wrinkle and go black [...] one by one” (Plath, 1963, 39). To pick one fig means giving up the rest, because “an intellectual woman is herself a cultural contradiction in terms, a disharmonious combination of biology and intelligence” (Whittier, 1976, 130).

Esther feels that having children is “like being brainwashed,” leaving one “numb as a slave” (Plath, 1963, 69) and she is repulsed because she fears motherhood completely abolishes creativity. She “seems to believe that the power of creativity can be attained only after abandoning womanhood” (Sakane, 1998, 31). For her, motherhood is not associated with mythological creation and rebirth but rather with death – not a physical death but an artistic one. To quote Mizuta Noriko, “Sylvia Plath places marriage and love, childbirth and motherhood in a general atmosphere of sickness, menace and decay” (2018, 81). She is horrified by the sight of a birthing table, as well as by the thought of women being heavily drugged to ease the pain and being too unconscious to see their child afterwards. As Elaine Showalter argues, “childbirth is a clear symbol of the female condition; the woman becomes an object, deprived of will and stupefied, the utter opposite of the joyous creator, the poet” (1992, 219). Esther is horrified by the childbirth she witnessed because it is not an act of creation but one of passive survival. She reaches a point where the “horror of the real world [...] is transparent, but she has no words, no way to communicate her vision” (Noriko, 2018, 77). Her intellect dissolves: she loses her ability to write, to formulate cohesive thoughts, to read. When she attempts suicide, Esther does not try to kill her physical body; much more likely, she is trying to kill the part of herself that is stuck in the liminal state between society's pressure and her own desires, hoping for a rebirth.

Esther struggles to find a role model, and therefore she has difficulties establishing her identity as a female artist. She is anxious about the lack of simultaneous life choices offered to women and views her gender as a burden. For Esther, motherhood is a futile state that excludes creativity. Ironically, it is because of the anxiety that she loses her ability to produce art and seeks redemption in suicide.

The Ascension of the Bell Jar: The Way Towards Esther's Recovery

In the last chapter of the novel, Esther's treatment and partial recovery is discussed in greater detail, from her traumatic experience with Dr. Gordon, a male psychiatrist, to her successful treatment by Dr. Nolan. Finally, Esther's thoughts and anxiety are validated, and as she can establish a mutually deep connection with another woman, which her relationship with her mother lacks, she “symbolically cements the crack between [her] two selves” (Ghandeharion, 2015, 70).

Dr. Gordon's treatment is bound to fail because “it is primarily [Esther's] ‘head’ that needs treatment; yet what is treated is the body” (Séllei, 2003, 147), and thus the shock therapy traumatizes her. The ineffectiveness of the therapy lies in Dr. Gordon's attitude

that reflects the exact sexist preconceptions that cause Esther's anxiety. When Esther first meets him, he belittles her mental state and lays the foundations for Esther's reticence by stating that she is 'upset'. After her first shock treatment Esther wonders what terrible thing she has done to deserve this, as "she has internalized her own oppression" (Paley, 2019, 28). Healing is brought about by Dr. Nolan, who develops mutual trust with Esther. As Dr. Nolan finally "understands her anxiety to be trapped in a world dominated by men" (Möller, 2002, 27), Esther feels truly heard and understood. In addition, Dr. Nolan, as a female psychiatrist, is the first woman in Esther's life who represents a kind of compromise between the expectations of society and self-fulfillment, as she embodies "the possibilities that arise when women are given the freedom and opportunity to make their own decisions about how they will conform to stereotypes" (Paley, 2019, 26).

Besides providing professional help, Dr. Nolan substitutes the maternal understanding Esther lacks and addresses the anger that Esther feels towards her mother. The underlying conflict between Esther and Mrs. Greenwood is the lack of motherly understanding, which leads to the absence of a fundamental connection one needs for a successful transition into adulthood. No matter how great the sacrifice of her mother was in teaching shorthand and providing for both, Mrs. Greenwood, unconsciously, does not admit that Esther is struggling, and her concern, although real, is superficial. Her mother never scolds her, but begs "with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong" (Plath, 1963, 107). What the mother and Dr. Gordon have in common is that they both understate the severity of Esther's condition. The reason behind Mrs. Greenwood's lack of understanding is her internalization of the image of womanhood. She sees Esther's struggle as her own failure as a mother and a woman. After Esther is ready to return to the world outside the facility, her mother's words are the following: "We'll act as if this were a bad dream" (Plath, 1963, 250). Denial, in this case, would only lead to Esther's relapse because she is only able to recover if she can identify the root of her anger and anxiety, and as a result, cope with its source. In Susan Coyle's words, Esther "decides not to hide from the horror that she has felt and been but to accept it as an integral [...] part of herself" (1984, 172).

The end of the novel does not offer reassurance nor a definite ending, but Esther is metaphorically born again as "she learns [...] to forge a new identity" (Perloff, 1972, 521), and her broken, fragmented sense of self is starting to become whole again. Esther, by the end, is very much aware of how society affects her psyche, but she learns how to gain control. With the help of Dr. Nolan, she gets birth control, an empowering move "that frees her from an unwanted relegation to the domestic sphere" (Dowbnia, 2014, 586). It should be noted, however, that "Esther emerges from the hospital with a psyche still obsessed with the sense of catastrophe, of threat from the brutal masculine force, and of her own vulnerability" (Mizuta, 2018, 80). The presence of the bell jar, hanging above her is very much present in her consciousness at the end of the novel, when she asks: "How did I know that someday

[...] the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (Plath, 1963, 254). Esther is aware that her freedom is fragile because the society into which she returns has not changed yet; it is only she who, at least for a time, knows how to adapt.

Through her journey from her attempted suicide to her recovery, a metaphorical rebirth, Esther learns how to relate healthily to other women and, consequently, to herself by being validated and finding a positive role model. The bell jar, however, with its strangling emptiness, could descend anytime. Society is the same, but what Esther gained is essentially an awareness of herself, her past, and the world around her, in which she can now search for her identity not in relation to femininity.

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath, by reflecting on her own experience as a young woman in the mid-20th century, points out systemic problems in American society regarding gender inequality, showing how social ideals can infiltrate every aspect of life, influencing the choices and relationships of individuals. *The Bell Jar* is an accurate depiction of post-war, emerging capitalist Western society that points to social issues that are still relevant and unresolved half a century later.

Although in the post-war period the sexes were equal in theory, the pre-World War I patriarchal ideology resurged, and society became fixated on women remaining in the domestic sphere. Women felt pressured to choose between the socially constructed picture of femininity, financial stability, and certainty in the domestic sphere or the life of an "unfeminine", neurotic woman with a career. It is precisely the seemingly mutually exclusive options that cause Esther's anxiety.

The article discussed the historic context and highlighted the systemic misogyny that limited young women's life choices in Plath's time via the protagonist's trajectory, as it discussed the phases of Esther's psychological descent and her journey to recovery. First it demonstrated the pressure Esther feels to identify with the feminine ideals created by the male gaze: the saint-like future housewife, or the object of sexual desire, which corrupts her mental health, as she feels that under the social circumstances an individual definition of womanhood and female sexuality is not possible. It then moved on to examine Esther's worsening depression linked to the idea that a career and femininity are mutually exclusive, and motherhood, for her, is not creation but the end of the possibility of becoming a writer. The argument then focuses on the recovery phase, emphasizing the role of the female psychiatrist in the healing process.

The story of Esther Greenwood's mental breakdown and recovery points out how artificially created ideas that oppress certain social strata can infiltrate and poison one's life to the smallest detail. The character's experience is universal: that of modern young women who simultaneously manage the transition from girlhood to womanhood, navigate between discovering themselves, and finding their vocation under the pressure of society.

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