

Trauma effect leading to self-destruction: A study on Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract

Destructiveness may, however, sometimes seriously disrupt and interfere with both artistic creation and treatment. Destructive feelings may become overwhelming and lead neither to self-creation in treatment nor to artistic creations, even by the highly skilled. Instead, these feelings may be dealt with by uncreative attempts at control and stasis. Trauma is a mental disorder that disrupts people's thoughts and behaviours. Today, trauma is recognized as one of the most common mental illnesses worldwide that need to be studied and investigated in some disciplines and through literature in particular. Anyone may develop trauma and depression regardless of age or social background, yet, women are most likely prone to depression. Sylvia Plath was unable to turn creation into self-creation, the construction of new and valuable aspects of personality and emotion. Strong drives to destruction as well as creation appear in many of her poems. There are new images of the ominous, deadly side of homely kitchen things and of living bodies and flowers. *The Bell Jar* is a highly autobiographical novel that unveils Plath's seemingly perfect life, underlain by grave personal discontinuities, some of which doubtless had their origin in the death of her father Otto Plath.

Keywords: Mental illnesses, Trauma, Depression, Neurotic, Psychotherapy

Since the dawn of humanity, many diseases have swept and killed a large number of people; some of these diseases have been worked on and eliminated, while others continue to threaten humans. Disorders are not only physical; there are also mental illnesses. Slade (2009) defines mental illness as a condition that has no known physical cause, it is rather a functional illness, and the subjective experience apparently lies at the centre of mental diseases. One of the most commonly recognized mental disorders in the world today is depression. In clinical terms,

depression is defined as a phrase used to describe any disorder in which a disruption in the person's mood is the primary aspect or problem. Clinical depression, also known as major depressive disorder, is one of the most prevalent and significant types of depression (Pierce, 2018). Major depressive disorder is characterized by the co-occurrence of multiple distinct symptoms. Beginning with chronic grief, bad temper, anhedonia, drowsiness, low energy, feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem, extreme self-blame, complications in appetite and weight, anxiety and tension, troubled sleep, which can be insomnia and hypersomnia, difficulties in concentration and decision-making, physical discomfort such as headaches and back pain, and last but not least, desperation, suicidal thoughts or behaviour. Anhedonia is likely the most distinguishing symptom of major depression, which is the disappearance of the individuals' capacity to appreciate things that they would typically like. Those who are depressed perceive life from the lenses of pessimism, thinking that any daily practices or social interactions are pointless in helping them to step aside from their dark zone.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath tells the story of a gifted young woman's mental breakdown beginning during a summer internship as a junior editor at a magazine in New York City in the early 1950s. *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 novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, share many similarities with Plath, including her inability to adapt to New York City, her attempt to commit suicide by taking an excess dose of sleeping pills, her period of recovery involving electroshock and psychotherapy. The novel was interpreted as autofiction via which Plath attempted to liberate herself from an oppressive past experience, but also to point to a possibility of struggle through re-vision. Esther Greenwood may have completed a semi-

successful rite of passage, but in reintegrating her into a society which is only ideologically represented as desirable, Plath, perhaps inadvertently, made overt the lack of possible narratives for acceptable female experience and the unacknowledged multitudes of untold herstories which deserve recognition. Plath implicitly voiced a demand for female reconfiguration of the official historical conception of the world, one that Smith pointed to and one that to this day pulses with subversive strength.

One of the most highly known reasons for depression is stress. It has been demonstrated that the majority of severe depressive episodes in adult samples are preceded by painful events. This defies the popular belief that most people do not experience depression following a traumatic occurrence. *The Bell Jar*'s narration unfolds from the hysteric mind of Esther Greenwood. Esther is not only an unreliable narrator; she is psychologically damaged and suicidal. Critics of *The Bell Jar* too often rely on content from Plath's life for analysis. Literary scholar Henry Schevy credits Plath's death with the sensationalism and misunderstanding of her work, contending that too many *pay insufficient attention to the division between art and life* (20). Readers look to Plath's dark fictional work and see Sylvia, rather than Esther. It is useful to consider Plath's perspective, but analysis that rests on the novel as an autobiographical work does a disservice to the text. To take Plath, or Esther for that matter, at her word, is to forget that fiction is meant to produce cultural meaning rather than personal. This poignant novel by Sylvia Plath about a young woman's nervous breakdown holds many life-lessons. *The Bell Jar* uses symbolism and cynicism in its many layers to express the harsh reality of depression and feelings of social inequality. The scenes of suicide are powerful and makes one look at why someone would desire to take their life. In *The Bell Jar*, we undeniably encounter an amnesiac condition of its main protagonist, who, in a condition of severe mental distress, is not capable of functioning in the real world. Her dissolved self follows the path of ritual initiation proposed by the patriarchal system which forces her to complete it without self-realization.

Though Plath is a poet, she has one novel, *The Bell Jar*, which is a semi-autobiographical novel published in 1963, a month before her death. It recounts the story of Esther Greenwood, a young lady dealing with severe depression who eventually ends up in an asylum after her endeavour of committing suicide. Innes explains that Esther is a college student, a skilled writer, and a winner of a fashion magazine contest. She is a highly-educated, semi-liberated, emerging intellectual and a sexually confused late adolescent. Finally, she is mentally ill. Esther, like Plath, recovers

from her suicide attempt and goes to the female psychiatrist Dr. Nolan for help. She secludes herself from other people her old teachers, employers and even her mother. Under Dr. Nolan's treatment, Esther is slowly able to break the bell jar that she feels had cut her off from the outside world. She finds herself normal, attracted to men like Irvin, she finally manages to make love with him despite in her previous encounters. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther describes the relationship between mind and body as one in which each imprisons the other. The mind traps the body literally; it gets Esther locked in a psychiatric hospital. But at the same time, the body traps the mind. It has little tricks from preventing her from killing herself. After following multiple attempts at suicide, Esther finally manages to overdose of enough sleeping pills as to land herself in the hospital. Shortly after she is sent to a Psychiatric Ward, where it is expected electroshock treatments will cure her depression. She calls the body a cage that prevents the mind from extinguishing itself. If only there was something wrong with my body, she tells her nurses. She views problems of her mind as different from the problems of her body.

Depression is like a demon that possesses the patients' minds, attacks their thoughts, and disturbs their behaviours. By utilizing Beck's model to study the mindset of the depressed character Esther in the selected novel, the analysis can give a clearer picture of the character's thoughts and sometimes unreasonable actions, such as committing suicide after going through what may be called a passing phase. *The Bell Jar* becomes a key to the complex psyche of both Esther and Plath herself. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of this novel is actually Sylvia Plath and the trauma of breakdown, suicide attempts, and shock therapy described here are largely the personal experiences of the novelist. First of all, she takes on her mother, who wants her to become either a conventional career woman or wife and not a creative writer. *The Bell Jar*, about an inward struggle to come to grips with depression and regarding an interest in life. Esther's slow dissent into madness is the result of her ego's incapability that compensates between her id and superego, finally leading to depression and neurosis. The feminist re-visioning of the trauma experience emphasises that *one of the prominent wounds of trauma is the crushing of the human spirit...which may indeed be the hardest wound to heal* (Root, 1992) and this form of trauma is manifested in *The Bell Jar*.

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