سرد الذات وتدوين الآخر: دراسة ثقافية لرواية بلاث "الناقوس الزجاجي "

م. م استبرق يحيى محمد

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البريد الإلكتروني Email : hum807.astaeq.yehaa@uobabylon.edu.iq

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Narrating the self, writing the other: A cultural reading of Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Assistant lecturer: Estabraq Yahya Mohammed
Babylon University/College of Education for Human Studies/ English Department

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الخلاصة

تستعرض الورقة البحثية التحديات التي واجهت المرأة الأمريكية في خمسينيات القرن العشرين، وتسلط الضوء على سعيها لتحقيق هويتها ضمن بيئة ذكورية حيث تتداخل التجربة الشخصية مع التصوير الثقافي في رواية بلاث الوحيدة" الناقوس الزجاجي "، وتتناول الورقة نضال بطلة الرواية إستر غرينوود ضد التقييدات الأمريكية في الخمسينيات وما تواجهه المرأة الحديثة من قرارات معقدة فيما يخص حياتها وأدوارها الأسرية. من خلال الاستعانة بتوظيف قراءة ثقافية للسياق الأمريكي في ذلك الوقت ومفهوم الذكورة السامة، تفحص هذه الورقة البحثية كيف تحاكي عناصر السيرة الذاتية لبلاث المفهوم التقليدي لتلك الفترة، حيث كثيرًا ما كان يُتوقع من النساء التمسك بالأدوار التقليدية بدلًا من مواصلة الابتكار مثل نظرائهن من الرجال. وتثبت الدراسة أنه من خلال شخصية إستر، توضح الرواية الصراعات التي تواجهها النساء أثناء محاولاتهن إيجاد سبيلهن في مجتمع يُهيمن عليه الرجال والأدوار التقليدية التي يُتوقع من النساء أن يلعبنها. ومن ثم تؤكد هذه الورقة البحثية أيضًا على قيمة عمل بلاث من خلال تحليل ثقافي للنص، وذلك من أجل تقدير كفاح المرأة في سياق فترة التغيير في السياق الثقافي الأمريكي. أخيرًا، تُضيف الورقة

البحثية الراهنة إلى المناقشات القائمة في مجال النقد الثقافي والأدبي لأنها تُبرز كيف أن سرد بلاث لا يقتصر على تفكيك المعايير المجتمعية فقط، بل يتفاعل أيضًا مع موضوعات الهوية والقوة والتصوير الثقافي للمرأة .

Abstract

The paper explores the challenges encountered by American women in the 1950s, illuminating their quest for identity within a patriarchal landscape and between personal experience and cultural representation in Plat's sole novel, *The Bell Jar*. It focuses on the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, 's struggle against the constraints of 1950s America and the complex decisions that modern women face regarding their own lives and family roles. By employing a cultural reading of the American context of that time and the concepts of toxic masculinity, this paper examines how Plath autobiographical elements mirror the border understanding of the period, as women were frequently expected to adhere to traditional roles instead of pursuing innovation like their male counterparts. The paper establishes that through Esther's character, the novel portrays the struggles that women encounter as they try to find their way in a society that is dominated by men and the traditional roles that women are expected to play. Through a cultural analysis of the text, this paper also emphasises the literary value of Plath's work in order to appreciate the struggles of women during the transformative period in American culture. Finally, the current paper adds to the existing discussions in the field of cultural and literary criticism as it shows how Plath's narrative not only deconstructs societal norms but also engages with the themes of self, agency, and the cultural representation of women.

1. Introduction

"Must get out of Snake Pit. There is an increasing market for mental hospital staff. I am a fool if I do not relive, recreate it." – Plath: The unabridged Journal of Sylvia Plath.

After watching the film *The Snake Pit*, Plath intended to write a novel similar to Mary Jane Ward's *The Snake Pit*; thus, the codes of mental illness were the primary foundation for the work. Whereas Plath decided to turn her experience into words on paper, it is not only these experiences that formed her text but also the film's influence. Deriving the same concept of being tortured by ECT treatment as a snake pit, Plath creates a more detailed illustration of mental illness torture using *The Bell Jar*. Furthermore, it is possible that Plath desired to write something that would get high ratings or massive acceptance, like Ward's novel, but she

was disappointed. In conclusion, *'The Snake Pit'* was almost like a model on which Plath's narrative formed its codes. They examine how various civilisations interpret history to satisfy the ideological requirements of their power structures. Ultimately, the author has determined that these contradicting elements have a purpose.

As Plath was one of the guest editors in 1953 in Mademoiselle Magazine, there is no doubt that she was affected by it. The magazine evoked the two different types of women in American society at that time. Once they talked about homemakers and motherhood, they also advised women in their careers. Thus, when Esther is viewed as struggling between the two matters, it seems that the author wants to transfer her dilemma to her character. As a result, the novel is a reaction to the mass culture at the time of Plath, which affected women's minds, including the author's. Plath did not refuse or agree obviously with the ideologies of popular culture at her time; instead, she presents their influence on women's thinking (Winder, 2016, p. 45).

This paper aims to investigate *The Bell Jar*, examine its definition and understanding of culture, and uncover the heterogeneity of its context. Despite Esther's exposure to women who challenge conventional femininity, she remains unable to completely alleviate the anxiety stemming from her affiliation with them, persistently striving to separate herself from their influence. Esther praises her boss, Jay Cee, for her brains; however, shortly after that, she refers to her as "plug-ugly," simultaneously expressing both approval and disapproval (Plath, 1971, p. 5). Esther's connection with Doreen is similarly complex. Although Doreen's attention gratifies Esther, she simultaneously wants to distance herself from her (Plath, 1971, p. 14).

The initial portion of Plath's novel, detailing Esther's experiences in New York, is interspersed with culinary instances. Instances that further highlight Esther's uneasiness regarding her capacity to conform to societal norms, namely those dictated by the conservative representations perpetuated by women's magazines (Plath, 1971, p. 14). Esther's depression intensifies following her return from New York; Plath consistently associates her incapacity to read, write, and eat with her declining emotional condition. Esther informs her physicians that she is "not sleeping, not eating, and not reading" (Plath, 1971, p. 106). For Esther, reading and writing are as vital to her well-being as sleeping and eating; nonetheless, she feels perpetually dissuaded from engaging in these pursuits.

Sylvia Plath was undeniably one of the most significant writers in the vast landscape of 20th-century American literature. Throughout her brief and

tumultuous life, she crafted several poignant works that altered the perspectives of many readers, none more impactful than her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. Plath's writing is tightly interwoven with her era, marked by her unique style, the intricate themes she addressed, and the vivid environment she adeptly evoked in her literary works. As a modern writer, she delves deeply into the prevalent issues of her time, guiding individuals on an exploratory journey into their inner landscapes using innovative narrative techniques.

The Bell Jar, in particular, bears the weight of Plath's own experiences and reflections on identity and mental health. It is an autobiographical novel that provides a glimpse into a crucial period of Plath's life when she worked as an editor for a fashion magazine, which adds a layer of authenticity to her narrative. The genesis of the novel coincided with a difficult time during Plath's life; she began writing it and ultimately completed it while grappling with significant mental health challenges. For roughly a year, she painstakingly poured her thoughts into the manuscript. The novel candidly addresses the darkness of depression and her harrowing suicide attempts, depicting the profound struggles faced by the protagonist. Through poignant notes that Plath left behind, it is evident that the dissociation experienced by the heroine parallels Plath's own two voluntary suicide attempts, both tragically culminating in her rescue. At first glance, *The Bell Jar* might seem like a mere coming-of-age story. However, upon deeper analysis, readers uncover layers of profound meaning and insight, particularly when viewed through the lens of feminist criticism.

Initially published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas due to concerns about the harsh realities depicted within its pages, Plath felt anxious about potential backlash from those close to her. Despite her fears, the book made an indelible mark on literature. Although it did not garner widespread attention immediately after its release, Plath's husband played a crucial role in elevating her literary legacy. He worked diligently to cultivate her image as an emerging author of talent and significance. Following the release of her collection of poems, the literary world began to recognise Plath's extraordinary gifts as a writer. Tragically, until her untimely death, Plath remained unaware of the profound impact and recognition she had generated as a prominent figure in literature. She left behind an impressive array of masterpieces that continue to resonate with readers today, providing a timeless opportunity for those who feel isolated or helpless to find solace and connection within their own experiences through her words.

Moreover, Smith (2010) indicates how, eventually, Esther seems to discover, on her path to recovery, that the only way to achieve acceptability by society is to comply with the more traditional, domestic models offered by Mademoiselle Magazine (Smith, 2010, p, 19). These distinctions, for Esther, are often directly linked to how women in the novel relate to or interact with their food. Esther's mother and her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, perform the roles of the ideal 1950s homemaker (Smith, 2010, p, 20). Again, Esther compares herself to others around her. Unlike Jody, who makes delicious, experimental scrambled eggs and is "practical and a sociology major," Esther sees herself as deviant for not cooking and wanting instead to become a writer. Esther's anxiety becomes even more understandable when looking at Mademoiselle Magazine's recurring column on cooking.

Ultimately, Wagner (2010) asserts that in *The Bell Jar*, like the conventional bildungsroman, the characters flee to an urban setting that symbolises the potential for self-discovery and existential truths. Characters such as Pip, Paul Morel, and Jude Fawley romanticise the city as a hub of knowledge and experience, believing their lives will undergo significant transformation upon relocation (Wagner, 2010, p.56). Numerous incidents in the latter sections of the novel are rudimentary. Plath appears reluctant to forfeit essential facts, although she acknowledges that her readers are, in essence, engaging with two narratives. The initial portion of *The Bell Jar* presents a traditional narrative of female orientation and education, with clear signs of the shortcomings of that education emerging towards the conclusion of the New York trip. The latter half presents a similarly traditional depiction of mental decline and its therapy, a portrayal that was somewhat novel in fiction during the late 1950s, significant both culturally and personally to Plath. Nonetheless, the demands of the fictional format were urgent, and Plath had already included numerous characters and episodes in her framework (Wagner, 2010, p.62).

The evident parallels between Plath's experiences and Esther's are valid subjects for discussion in the context of bildungsroman, as the effectiveness of such writings often depends on the author's emotional engagement with the themes. Bildungsroman is usually an early work, either the first or second, and much of the narrative's vitality and ambivalence arises from the author's deep involvement with the process being depicted. In Plath's case,

2. The Bell Jar

The Bell Jar endeavours to portray the condition of American women in the 1950s sympathetically, illuminating the challenges encountered in a

patriarchal culture and the battle for women to establish their identities. Recognising that contemporary women encountered challenging choices about their personal and familial lives constituted a feminist awakening, as women were not expected to exhibit the same level of innovation as men.

The Bell Jar is sometimes characterised as an autobiography that recounts the breakdown and subsequent recovery of Esther Greenwood, a white, middle-class young lady navigating life during the Eisenhower era in America. Esther, akin to Sylvia Plath, reached a juncture in her life where she had to navigate the sexual and social contract of the 1950s: a contract that, in the initial chapters of the novel, appears disproportionately biased towards male agendas and interests, yet progressively transitions towards the potential for female autonomy and agency. Esther's quest for self-determination within a society fixated on domesticity and sexual propriety, reflective of its national identity and politics, presages unavoidable drama. Coming of adulthood among marriage-focused and fervently child-rearing women must have been profoundly challenging for a young lady seeking her own identity and striving to assert her demands.

According to Bloom (2009), The *Bell Jar* engages, with a sense of vitality, in the normalisation rituals of national narratives on its political and contextual themes. Esther's quest for identification, juxtaposed with the contrasting realms of poetry and motherhood, presents a figure that vehemently navigates the constrained choices before her, like an agitated pinball, striving for and subsequently rebounding from distinct facets of feminine identity. Nonetheless, despite this compelling attraction to the victorious notion of realised identity, the text simultaneously resists a simplistic reiteration of the prevailing understanding of American Cold War sociality (p. 141).

Esther's interaction with a black kitchen worker at Belsize mirrors her previous encounter with the Russian woman. The presence of the kitchen here is deliberate. It highlights the alleged exclusion of race from the Kitchen Debate and similarly from the issue of U.S. women's captivity during the Cold War. The novel explicitly presents Esther's decision during the Cold War asylum: The reader must choose between a million identities or a singular, complete identity. Nevertheless, the novel delineates this as a spurious dichotomy between the fragmented and the full. This period illustrates the state's expectation for a connection between women and the nation, as evidenced by a 1950 U.S. National Security Directive aimed at guiding individuals "toward the direction [the

state desires] for reasons which [s]he believes to be [her] own" (Bloom, 2009, pp. 144-145).

The Bell Jar departs from this relationship and illustrates how gender conservatism constrains not only white women but also similarly affects black men. Furthermore, consider that Friedan's "feminine mystique" partially originates from an inadequate lexicon to articulate the limitations imposed by patriarchy. In that context, *The Bell Jar* illustrates the existence of a language, albeit one that may differ from the one envisioned in Friedan's work. One associated the dissatisfaction of white middle-class women with racial liberation and the clarification of the Soviet other (Bloom, 2009, p. 147).

3. Narrating the self

The part of honesty that many cannot get away from literature is what tightens up the novel. For the first time, Plath expresses herself in such an amusing and self-deprecating manner in the face of life, self, and neurological issues. Plath wrote her biography, and the novel was first published under a fictitious name so that the characters would not affect the truth in the story. People who have been in a dark tunnel or forest of darkness for a long time will find this book to be an autobiography of blackness and blood, anguish, dread and an overwhelming psychological crisis. There is no escape from Plath's prison; the only way to avoid it is to pass the time by killing oneself rather than entering the glass bell. Plath's agony and anguish are expressed in various ways, from direct confessions to abstractions, and she uses all of them.

Esther's story mirrors Plath's life up to 1953, when Plath, like Esther, was a budding young writer. Her initial suicide attempt, the protagonist's interactions with mental health professionals, the context surrounding the reading of *The Bell Jar*, and her overall journey throughout the narrative all closely reflect Plath's own life experiences. Esther speaks with and receives treatment under Dr Gordon, as well as electro-shock therapy. Just as things begin to turn for the worse for Esther with Dr Gordon, an intensive connection with male figures complicates the protagonist's understanding of female ones, so too do things begin to turn for the worst for Esther in Plath's life, where Dr Hu focuses on cures associated with gender roles and sexuality.

The lack of passion in the prose, in favour of a shocking coolness, may have lightened the novel's overall weight. People in large groups constantly mock themselves and others in the face of unrealistic expectations and emotions based on what could happen in the future. Here, all that the heroine has to deal with are diversions and gloom, and nothing more than fate can help her out of this situation. Unintentionally,

and partly via irony, the scene of death and humiliation. Nevertheless, there is another side to the story, and Sylvia is a different macho and a struggle that would never have worked out in the best way.

Plath is genuinely talking about herself and her personal experiences. She published the novel under a pseudonym to protect those closest to her. After going so far into her identity and explaining it to the reader, it was apparent that she would come out as transgender in public, demonstrating how cruel her mother is and how much she suffers from losing her father at a young age and then being frustrated at the beginning of her career when she wants to publish her poems, concluding in a failed marriage and her husband's betrayal of her.

During that year, she tried to take her life on two occasions, underwent both regular and experimental psychiatric treatment, and eventually recovered. However, over the next year and a half, she was involved in divorce proceedings with her husband, novelist Ted Hughes, after the events described in *The End of the Affair* (Salvadori, 2017). The social and political contexts of early 1960s America are also briefly sketched, with an emphasis on the context in which American women in her educated cohort perceived the options available to them.

In general, women's literature draws a sizable audience due to its ability to convey a wide range of emotions and conflicts through narrative style, metaphors, and other literary devices that tap into the reader's emotional receptivity and hypersensitivity. Among the novel's most dramatic sequences are Esther's electric shock treatments, which portray her diseased mind as one trapped inside a glass bell, unable to see or grasp the foolishness of others or their artificial sensations. Suffocating thoughts and human misery that flooded Sylvia Plath's life and a conflicted relationship with their mother caused a horrible psychological crisis that devastated Plath's existence and ultimately brought her suicide. *The Bell Jar* is a tragic foreshadowing of Plath's death or her portrait as a tragic victim. A systematic analysis, however, reveals a very different novel. In addition to tracing Esther Greenwood's evolution from passive, blind victim to active victor, a careful examination of narrative voice reveals that Plath offers both earthy comic relief and cosmic insight, departing deliberately from her Wordsworth precursor. *The Bell Jar* enacts not just one liberation but three in three realms: society, space, and psyche. No longer a tragic victim, Plath ultimately transcends the tragic, offering freedom and hope, a key to survival and victory to all who care to read.

Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* during the summer of 1962. Most of the novel's events happened earlier, between 1949 and 1955. New York, Cambridge,

Wellesley, and Boston are the four significant locations of the novel. The first three city names exclude the implication of psychosis: Ivy League prestige and happiness-inducing success. The last name, however, causes the opposite effect. Here, Esther's tragedy crashes on the rock of oppression, culminating in an unsuccessful drowning. With Holley returning to win the pie sprinkling on the upper street of the upper city, Esther turns towards the abyss, leaping for freedom into the depths of Ginna's list of subways and graves (Salvadori, 2017).

To summarise, Wagner (2010_) claims that in *The Bell Jar*, like in the conventional bildungsroman, the protagonists escape to a metropolis image the opportunity to discover their true selves and truths about the meaning of life. Pip, Paul Morel, and Jude Fawley, among others, see the city as a hub of knowledge and experience and believe that their lives will alter radically once they transfer to the big city (Wagner, 2010, p.56). In the story's second half, many of the scenes are bare-bones. While Plath was wary about revealing too many details, she also knew that her readers were reading two stories concurrently. The first half of *The Bell Jar* presents the typical female orientation and education, with evident signs of failure in the New York experience. Both culturally and emotionally essential to Plath, the second half depicts mental decline and its therapy in a novel way that was relatively new to literature in the late 1950s. However, Plath had already crammed many characters and episodes into her narrative structure (Wagner, 2010, p.62).

Discussions of the apparent links between Plath's and Esther's experiences are appropriate when discussing bildungsroman because the power of such writings usually rests on the author's emotional commitment to the issues. As Buckley points out, a bildungsroman's vitality and ambivalence are primarily due to the author's involvement in the chronicling process, which generally occurs in a first or second work. It was not only Plath's debut novel but also published under a pseudonym, in this case, Sylvia Plath (Wagner, 2010, p.66). Many contemporary readers may recognise *The Bell Jar* as a tale about the clash of two worlds. However, it is also a portrait of the oppressive cultural mould in which many women of the mid-20th century found themselves, keeping them from living the creative lives that they were capable of. *The Bell Jar* thrives beyond Sylvia Plath's autobiography for those who grew up in the 1950s.

4. Toxic masculinity

Throughout the first half of the novel, Plath's main character, Esther, deals with the questionable behaviour of males she encounters. Toxic masculinity means " the way men are culturally trained and socially

pressured to behave. The three core tenants of toxic masculinity are toughness, anti-femininity and power – manifest in diverse forms. However, they collectively contribute to the construction of a sense of manliness" (Foss, 2022, n.p). The men she meets abuse her horribly and do not even realise it when they do it. Her lack of personality makes her seem like nothing more than a flesh puppet to be fed drinks and mansplained to. Traditional masculine males of the 1960s would have likely misbehaved if they caught their wives reading this, and they would not have noticed.

When Plath first published the book, she did so under a pseudonym because she feared the reaction. If one has to use a pseudonym and make up a story to hide the truth, there is something fundamentally wrong with reality. Esther's concern about her association with women who flout the norms of femininity persists even after she is exposed to them, and she continues to remove herself from them. She praises Jay Cee for his brains but then calls him "plug-ugly," as though she simultaneously approves and disapproves of him (Plath, 1971, p. 5). Doreen and Esther's relationship is equally problematic. Esther feels pleased that Doreen has noticed her, yet she wishes to distance herself from her concomitantly (Plath, 1971, p. 14). Much of the book's first half is devoted to Esther's eating adventures in New York. Esther's fear of not fitting in with the more traditional images shown in women's magazines may be seen in some key scenes (Plath, 1971, p. 14). Upon her return from New York, Esther becomes progressively sad, and Plath constantly connects her deteriorating emotional state with her inability to read, write, and eat. In her doctor's office, Esther tells them that she is "not sleeping, not eating, and not reading" (Plath, 1971, p. 106). Even though reading and writing are as crucial to Esther's health as sleep and food, she believes she is constantly discouraged.

For the first time in her life, Esther Greenwood, a Boston lady who moved to New York City, shared her experience in *The Bell Jar*. Sylvia Plath used the pseudonym Victor Lucas to pen this novel. One month after this book was released, the author passed away. People were ready to draw connections between Esther Greenwood and Sylvia Plath at the time. The author's depiction of Esther's melancholy and mental breakdown, electroconvulsive therapy, and the suicide attempt are sharp. Throughout the book, the author criticises the patriarchal society in the United States at the time. Through a unique storytelling technique, the struggle of a young woman to find her voice is masterfully shown—one of the best semi-autobiographical novels I have ever encountered.

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While Esther Greenwood was interning for a fast-paced fashion magazine in New York City one summer, Plath's undergraduate breakdown was depicted in *The Bell Jar*, which describes Greenwood's mental breakdown. As a woman in a sexist culture, Esther suffers insurmountable difficulty. Nevertheless, she also recounts the existential misery she felt the year she lost control of her life in a first-person retrospective narration that alternates between sardonic detachment and impassioned lyricism.

5. Cultural reading of *The Bell Jar*

Wagner (1986) has addressed Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* as an example of an individual's process of adapting to the changing cultural conditions of the 1950s. Budick (1987) explores Plath's *The Bell Jar* from a feminist perspective, noting that Plath not only sees the world in terms of male and female languages striving for dominance but also seeks to write in the feminine. Esther's "alienation from language," as Susan Coyle has termed it, is explicitly traced back to the book. At the same time, she changes this representation of the female experience from an archetypal or traditional depiction of femaleness into an active process of feminist discourse (1989, p144). Plath avoids some of the critical problems of formal, feminine writing by rejecting the deadly attraction of the womb-like mind and the need for a retreat that may function well in female sexuality (Budick,1987, p, 23).

Esther feels nauseous and is overwhelmed by "the peanut-smelling mouth of the train" as she attempts to grasp their extreme anguish. (*The Bell Jar*, 1971, p, 2). The image of the peanut is merely a decorative touch. A newspaper item about attempted suicide and other violent events in the novel causes Esther to eat some peanuts from a bag she had bought as another symptom of her guilty gluttony. (*The Bell Jar*1971, p 144). Gill (2008) claims that, as in other stories and notebook drawings like Snow Blitz, Plath's third-person narrator mimics an anthropological tone (p. 90).

It has recently been argued by Maple (2009) that Esther has many of the same reactions to her disability as are prevalent in stories of disease or physical impairment, and she faces many of the same obstacles. Esther has to deal with these physical symptoms due to her mental condition. Even though Esther's encounters with these issues are tied to her gender, feminism alone cannot explain her experiences without considering disability theory (p). While figuring out her sexuality is integral to her quest for self-discovery, Esther's journey as a woman goes well beyond that. Much attention has been paid to the struggles of young women like Esther in the 1950s. For decades, scholars have argued that reading *The*

Bell Jar from a feminist viewpoint provides a new perspective on Esther and her life experiences. In addition to feminism's explanations, disability theory sheds light on Esther's experiences, from her loss of control to her concern about her future after she was released from the hospital (Maple,2009, p. 7)

By the end of the 1960s, America had witnessed, in rapid succession, the Cold War, the political assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, the civil rights movement, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the riots in Detroit, Newark, and other urban centres across the nation. Culturally, the decade saw the rise of new art forms such as performance art and video art, innovative poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka, Beat journalists such as Ken Kesey and Tom Wolfe, and the emergence of underground newspapers. As traditional literary forms began to be questioned, the prevailing novel of the decade, *The New Novel*, emphasised the emptiness of the subject, the absence of character, and the futility of the plot. Simultaneously, the discontent expressed by black writers such as James Baldwin and Ishmael Reed towards novelists like Norman Mailer and John Updike indicated a postmodern shift in perspective from the dominant social narrative of race relations in America to the focus on “self,” “the Other,” and “personal” or “family history" (Kip, 2019, p.44)

Furthermore, Smith (2010) points out that Esther finally discovers that the only way to be accepted by society is to adhere to the more traditional domestic patterns presented by Mademoiselle Magazine on her journey to recovery (19). Esther does so to once again compare herself with those around her. Given that she does not cook and aspires to be a writer, Esther perceives herself as a "deviant" rather than someone who is "practical and a sociology major." Examining Mademoiselle Magazine's cooking feature more closely reveals the reasons behind Esther's concerns (Smith, 2010, p. 12).

As a reasonable effort, it attempts to write about 1950s feminism in America and the treatment of mental illness at the time. Sylvia Plath's damaged psyche may be accessed through it, which is why it is so significant. Esther Greenwood, a young white lady from a middle-class family in America during Eisenhower's presidency, recounts her life's ups and downs in *The Bell Jar, which* many have called an autobiography. At this moment in her life, Esther, like Sylvia Plath, found herself in a position where she had to negotiate the 1950s sexual and social bargain: a deal that initially seemed hopelessly weighted in favour of male interests but gradually changed toward a more female-centred perspective. It is

only a matter of time before Esther's struggles for independence in a culture that values national identification and politics over individual liberation are played out brutally. It must have been quite difficult for a young lady trying to find her identity and establish her desire to come of age in a society so focused on marriage and childrearing.

Although *The Bell Jar* remains an influential artefact in popular culture, it does not provide a wholly unfiltered representation; therefore, it warrants consideration on its own merits. It is essential to recognise the intrinsic relationship between this culturally significant work and the specific societal conditions from which it arose; however, acknowledging this connection does not eliminate the ongoing discourse regarding its overall significance. Any recognition must carefully avoid descending into hyperbole or exaggerated praise. The symbol of *The Bell Jar* has infiltrated numerous narratives and contexts, complicating the prospect of attaining a wholly objective analysis. The author embeds sociological intent within a seemingly liberated framework when addressing various afflictions—regardless of gender—allowing these themes to convey their stories. She assumes a role that exceeds that of a mere chronicler. Often, she finds solace in the genuine language of her text's apparent shortcomings or revisits the same themes with notable frequency. Achieving literary success remains a distant ambition that presents significant challenges for individuals of all genders in this complex landscape.

Bloom (2009) examines Plath's description of the reward's intricate structure in her journal entry from 1952. A time-managed environment of schooling embraced as the psychic structure itself and threatened with disaster when all external systems are taken away: To manage profitably twelve hours a day for ten weeks when there is nothing, no one, to insert an exact pattern into the vast unfenced acreage of time, is a somewhat overwhelming task. To thrive in the competitive realms of educational institutions, publishing, and the literary world, the "superficial and artificial" pursuit of success is exemplified in the novel *(*pp. 112-113). Esther's self-punishing withdrawal from social life due to the breakdown of her capacity to make meaning in her life and American society's punishing relegation of middle-class women to the domestic sphere, breaking down their capacities to make meaning from their education regarding the larger social world-destroying the 'bright, safe bridge' of some career-can be read as the horror at the heart of this darkness. "When discussing 'the most powerful feminism in the world', it is important to note why America has produced it" (Bloom, 2009, p. 115)

Regarding the political and historical background, *The Bell Jar* participates in the normalising rituals of national mythologies with an almost joyous recklessness. During Esther's search for selfhood, we see a character who flies at the limited alternatives she has, like a pinball, aiming for and then bouncing away from discrete goals of feminine identity, like a roller coaster. To be fair, despite this strong drive toward the prized selfhood, the book also resists a simple replication of Cold War American sociality's common sense (Bloom, 2009, p. 141)

The Bell Jar disentangles a mutual relationship and shows how white women and black men are treated as equals due to gender rigidity. Friedan's "feminine mystique," if it stems partly from a lack of words to explain the restrictions of patriarchy, then The Bell responds by documenting how a language exists, although perhaps not the one Friedan's book envisaged. One theory connected white middle-class women's dissatisfaction with racial liberation and Soviet de-mystification (Bloom, 2009, p. 147).

The Bell Jar arises from its encapsulation of the genuine voice of a contemporary modern poet. For a broader audience, Sylvia Plath is perhaps most recognised as a confessional poet, celebrated equally for her poignant literary contributions and her tragic demise by suicide. However, it is crucial to underscore that her novel is not strictly autobiographical; rather, it represents the creative manifestation of an ideologically motivated intellect that is singularly original and profoundly expressive. *The Bell Jar* stands as a notable accomplishment within American literature, a fact that further enhances Sylvia Plath's significance in the historical narrative of literature. Moreover, understanding the specific historical context of the emergence of *The Bell Jar* is essential for comprehending both its autobiographical components and its overarching importance.

The period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s constituted a crucial juncture in American history, highlighting the pinnacle of women's domestic and economic struggles. This era was further characterised by an unprecedented level of male domination in the scientific and professional realms—an occurrence without precedent in American history. Consequently, women's achievements and societal roles are intricately linked with the psychological ramifications of the atomic age, which irrevocably transformed the very essence of reality and existence. The experience of being born and living as a woman in this society formed the foundation of the specific concerns tackled in *The Bell Jar*. Although the novel has maintained considerable influence and relevance over the years, it transcends its particular era; it continues to possess the

capacity to inform, critique, and inspire positive action among its readership.

The Bell Jar is a powerful and significant commentary articulated during a time characterised by the apogee of psychic, physical, and economic supremacy wielded by a formidable and aggressive segment of American society. The narratives of this historical epoch resonate profoundly with the generation of poets, presenting prime subjects for both exploration and artistic expression. A review of a recently staged adaptation of *The Bell Jar* proved to be rather disappointing, primarily because the characters and scenes presented on stage conveyed what could be termed "the voices of their own time" rather than successfully encapsulating the period and cultural backdrop of the novel for contemporary audiences. This situation raises significant questions concerning the imperative of honouring the cultural contexts inherent in an original text, the relationship with its audiences, the dependability of the narrator's voice and narrative style, and the necessity of distilling the agonies of present events through the unique perspective of a single individual. Ultimately, the question of how past experiences can inform the present becomes pressing when producing cultural artefacts that are rooted in one period but presented in another.

According to Kip (2019), *The Bell Jar* operates on the societal and cultural backdrop of 1950s America. Taken as a whole, the historical context of 1950s America divergently but jointly operates to structure the ambience through which Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* and the ambience upon which her narrator, Esther Greenwood, and her character act. Major components of this ambience are male dominance, differentiation between men's and women's realms, insistence on women's domesticity after the war, the expectation for middle-class white women to marry and serve as consumers, the rise of radical feminism, double standards for ordinary women, and women's thwarted subjectivity, which formed the social backdrop and cultural expectations that contextualised Esther's rebellion and suicide.

6. Conclusion

The novel can certainly be read as a planned performance within the controlled cultural space of post-war America. Plath's writing handily turns Esther Greenwood's descent into madness into a microcosm of more significant systemic failures. The "performance" is a matter of how Plath uses Esther's personal breakdown to reveal the violent material politics of the moment — a politics that pathologises women's discontent. This politics enforced narrow gender roles, a politics that shut down dissent. *The Bell Jar's* emphasis on white, middle-class femininity

that is racially and economically homogenous gives it a mode of address. Its unflinching exploration of insanity, sex and violence struck a chord with readers struggling with familiar repressions, making it an unlikely hit. However, its focus on a narrow demographic does not include marginalised voices, specifically those of women of colour or working-class women, who would have radically different experiences of the same structures.

The novel participates in the then-current discourse regarding women, work, and marriage, illustrating both the strict gender boundaries within which women could operate and how women resisted and negotiated these expectations. Historical readings also clarify more cultural work done by the text and how this work is mediated by Plath's positionality as a white, middle- to upper-middle-class female. The personal and social dangers of not conforming to the strictures of the ideology of feminine pure opposition and the cultural anxiety created by women's simultaneous rebellion against and responsibility for this ideology are made concrete. The character of Esther Greenwood is limited in her rebellion and perceived as too outside the borders of acceptable femininity to be successful. Moreover, Plath's class and racial privilege influence how the text operates and reinforces dominant ideologies. Whereas Esther Greenwood's madness exposes the dangers inherent in resisting gender boundaries, for more downtrodden women, class and racial minutiae that Martha Quest and Janet Frame would have read were elided from the text.

The novel circulates and reinforces dominant ideologies surrounding the body, sexuality, mental illness, family, and gender, but all of this is dependent upon race and class privilege. As such, far more radical narratives that directly address and confront the politics and institutionalisation of race and class are excluded or silenced. More broadly, these readings reveal the necessity of historical readings and the dangers of de-historicized readings that abjure responsibility for the cultural context in which the text operates and leave open the possibility for singular interpretive readings that have ahistorical origins or result in a homogenisation of cultures.

Plath's writing is often fraught with a sense of being on edge, and Esther calls this state *The Bell Jar*, an imaginary glass jar that invades the mind of someone and traps them in a disintegrating world thereof. It poses a considerable challenge to the individual's well-being—both psychological and cultural—and becomes even more menacing when the individual happens to be a woman and from a nation embroiled in wars. This entry deals with the understanding of self and others, as well as of

culture, coalescing into a quasi-spiritual state of having the worst things when viewed from Esther's attempt to narrate the self and write the other through the questions of authenticity and ambiguity in relation to the state of anonymity.

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