

## The Female Vs society in Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar"

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In a biographical note by Lois Ames, Sylvia Plath says about her novel, *The Bell Jar*, "...I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar."<sup>1</sup> In this autobiographical novel, the heroine is looking at people through this distorted lens. The novel describes the oppressive and patriarchal society in which the main character, Esther Greenwood, lives. Her career to be a poet is ambitious according to the standards of the 1950's American society because it was a field dominated by men at that time. Thus, her struggle is that of a female who tires to find and prove herself in a masculine world. Materialistically and socially, she is poor according to the social standard. She cannot but use her talent as a poet in order to go on living; hence she depends on keeping her scholarship and winning prizes. She lives in a society where women's life is constructed according to certain standards that curb women's ambitions, which Sylvia Plath has rejected strongly.

When Esther wins a fashion magazine contest along with eleven other young ladies by writing essays, stories, poems and fashion blurbs, she gets the chance to stay in New York and work for a whole month. Her interaction with the people in NY can be considered as the starting point of her declination. She meets people that are neither similar to her social standards nor her mental code, therefore, she begins to realize that she is unprepared for this glamorous, competitive, more chaotically diverse 'real' world.<sup>2</sup>

When Esther goes out to a party with Doreen, one of the eleven girls who wins a fashion magazine contest in New York along with Esther and whom she regards as a person who "makes [her] me forget

<sup>1</sup>Lois Ames, Biographical note to *Sylvia Plath: The Bell Jar* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999), p.262.

Subsequent references within my text are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buell, "Sylvia Plath's Traditionalism" Vol.5, No.1 (Autumn, 1976), p. 197

[her] my worries and feel wise and cynical as hell," (p.8) she begins, later that evening, to get this disturbing feeling that everything around her is not what she wants in her life. After returning home alone from the small party, her internal silence begins, as Esther explains, "The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence", and then continues on:

I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn't hear a thing. The city hung in my window... but it might just as well not have been there at all, for the good it did me." (pp.18-19)

This disturbed feeling increases day after day as Esther becomes more involved in the New York society. The different mixture, which she finds in this society, makes her feel more confused and unsure. She is torn between two worlds, the world represented by New York and its way of life which requires from her more than she can give, and the conventional world of her life with her family which is too simple for her to live. Esther thinks that she "should have been excited the way most of the other girls were" (p.2) but in reality she isn't because she has this difficulty of making the right choice of life. She has the problem of not knowing what she really wants and this decision becomes more difficult throughout her life as she encounters different people and various incidents that put her sometimes in positions that need decision making which she is not capable of making. This may be, as Linda Huf explains in her discussion of the story, because the American dream Esther is experiencing does not appeal to her completely because she dreams of being a poet and not some glamorous business woman or a housewife that society at that time wanted.<sup>3</sup>

When she meets Jay Cee, the head of the fashion magazine, she is reminded of her Chemistry teacher Mr. Manzi who had always encouraged her through her high school years, but the moment Jay Cee asks her about her future plans, she is surprised to say " I don't

<sup>3</sup> Linda Huf, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.62, 1991. P. 11

really know," I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true.' (p.32) This quotation reveals her inner conflict between what she wants and what reality seeks from her. She is lost in her own world and is trying to seek, indirectly, help from her surrounding environment, but every time she tries, she ends up in front of a brick wall of social standards that destroys the ambition of a high minded woman like Esther.<sup>4</sup>

Society has certain standards for young women like Esther that they have to reach in order men to recognize them. Such standards include their appearance and their interests, for example, they have to know how to cook well, sew well and be able to do shorthand not for the sake of learning but for the sake of impressing the opposite sex. As the reader may see, for instance, in Esther's mother who tries to convince her that shorthand is useful for young women in an attempt to try to change her mind about being a poet or a professor. According to her mother and the like, it is a practical thing to learn until she gets a husband, which exemplifies the idea that women of the 1950's could not have a career other than secretarial work. Society impose such beliefs that other than secretarial work, women have no other option but to wait to be married and become a mother which is something that does not seem to interest Esther.

This leads to another of society's conceptions, that marriage is a must for all women at a young age, but for Esther this conception has a double standard quality. This conception stems from her experience with other men such as Buddy Willard who was one of her earlier boyfriends. On one of her meetings with Buddy, Esther suddenly discovers something that totally changes her view of men and society. She discovers that he is not a 'pure' man as she has ignorantly thought him to be. At first she has admired Buddy and has had the impression that he is different from other men but after that discovery she describes their relationship as being like;

That Jewish man and that nun, although of course we weren't Jewish or catholic but Unitarian. We had together under our own imaginary fig tree, and what we had seen wasn't a bird coming out of an egg but a baby

<sup>4</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, "'A Ritual for Being Born twice': Sylvia Plath", Vol. 13, No. 4, Autumn, 1972, pp.507-508.

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coming out of a woman, and then something awful happened and we went our separate ways." (p. 55)

This imagery of the Jew and the Nun explains how impossible their relationship has become and generally it shows how her views of relationships between the opposite sexes have evolved throughout the novel. After this Incident something freezes inside Esther, she isn't annoyed because Billy has slept with someone, but the fact that he has lied to her and pretended to be pure when all the time he represents what she fears to meet in her personal life, a hypocrite. The idea that he has been laughing at her all the time has caused more damage inside both mentally and emotionally.

Another example for this doubled standard quality that Sylvia presents in the novel is when Esther's mother sends her an article written by a married woman called "In Defense of Chastity." In this article Esther sums up that "...the main point of the article was that a man's world is different from a woman's world... and the best man wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't... they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex...." (P. 66) Plath here reveals that although a woman's world is different from that of men's, their identities are defined by their relationships with men. This shows that the society she is trying to find does not fit the criteria she puts for herself, what is right and appropriate for them does not seem to be right for her.

The problem of not knowing what to do does not only affect her social life but it also affects her sexual life. She has difficulty in dealing with men and sex and this increases as she begins to encounter men from both the modern and the conventional world. Buddy Willard is not the only man whom she has met and who has an affect on her mental life. He was actually one of many images of men that are presented in this novel and that have a vital role in increasing her depression and frustration. After her relationship with Buddy, Esther decides that she is not going to keep her chastity and purity for her future husband just as her mother and many other women in her home town have wanted a girl like Esther to do. When she meets Constantin, the simultaneous interpreter who works at the UN, she decides to let go of herself more. After going out for a tour she decides to let him seduce her but when he turns her down she feels unwanted and

undesired by men and at the same time it makes her think about other things that she is incapable of doing besides having bad relationships, such as dancing, riding,....etc.

These conflicting and contrasted ideas that keep coming back and forth make her feel dreadfully inadequate and useless in a society that has certain needs from a woman like Esther. The only thing that she is good at is winning scholarships and prizes and this era is coming to an end. In this respect she describes herself as branching out like a fig tree which one fig would represent "a husband and a happy home, and another fig was a famous poet and another... the amazing editor... and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers," and among all this she saw herself "sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because [she] couldn't make up [her] mind which of the figs [she] would choose....[she] sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go back." (p.77)

This quotation reveals her inner states of confusion because she is unable to make a decision between following her heart or her states of mind. Deep inside she "wanted each and every one of them" (p. 77) but society has convinced her that a woman has only one choice, either to follow her heart which in her case being a poet or giving up the chance of having " a husband and a happy home and children" (p.77)

The idea of the duality of the individual that Esther has formed in her mind about people, especially men, proves itself more when she meets Marco, who is totally different from other men she has met. He is violent and "a woman-hater" as she describes him. He treats her inappropriately and tries to impose himself on her through several occasions, one of which is his attempt to rape her. Through the character of Marco, Plath presents the worst type of men that society could produce and by fighting him back and rejecting him, Esther, thus, rejects society's role and beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Although Esther stands up for herself several times and tries to reject society's double standard qualities, this alienates her from reality which causes her to later feel self-alienation and which leads further to Esther's mental breakdown and suicide attempts. These

<sup>5</sup> Diane S. Bonds, " The separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* " in *Women's Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, May, 1990, p. 52.

several suicide attempts can be seen as accidental survivals since they all end up in complete failure but they clearly show that Esther Greenwood is not mentally well, however, society's repression of the female contributes greatly to her collapse.<sup>6</sup>

As it seems, Plath is presenting women here as the victims of both men and society because it is through society that men are capable of treating women the way they do without thinking of the consequences of such actions not only on the physical side of women but also and most importantly on the mental side.

### **Conclusion**

Although this novel reflects Sylvia Plath's agony and frustration in her life, it also reflects the role which the society was living in at that time has played in that frustration since it was thought society that her frustration emerges. The heroine of The Bell Jar is living the conditions in which the woman of the society of Plath's time was living in.

Esther is presented as the reflection of Plath's life and the various incidents that Esther faces throughout the story such as winning scholarships and her various complicated relationships with men are similar to those of Plath.

Through this novel, Plath is presenting society's role and beliefs towards women at the 1950's. Esther and Plath shared a mutual passion for writing and a desire to make it a career but according to their society such a career was constrained and thought to be irrational for a woman. It is looked at as being an un-feminine role for a woman. Therefore, such beliefs have made the female role in society clearly undefined, thus making it impossible for women to make the right choices in life.

The book is clearly, as E. Miller Budick defines it, a " solution to the sociological problems of women, a language and an art competent to secure women against male domination."<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Plath through this

<sup>6</sup> Fredrick Buell, p. 202

<sup>7</sup> E. Miller Budick, "The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar" in *College English*, Vol. 49. No. 8, (Dec., 1987) P. 872)

novel wanted women to reject society's constrained roles and to become more independent and self-controlled. At the same time Plath wants to note out and make it clear that if society continues to impose such restrictions on women, this may lead to insanity as in the case of Esther whose constrained laws pushed her to attempt suicide several times.

The Bell Jar does not only symbolize Esther's madness but it also symbolizes the madness of an era that placed all women in a "belle" jar made of false ideals and inequality.

As men are part of societies imposed rules, they too have their own impact on women's life and Sylvia Plath characterizes this role as being negative. Esther's several negative experiences with men tell her that men are, however subtly, exploiters and hypocrites.

### **Bibliography**

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