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A Mad Woman's Self-exploration —A Lacanian Interpretation of *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract: *The Bell Jar* is a semi-autobiography novel written by Sylvia Plath, whose literary works are famous for pain, death, and self-exploration. Besides, Plath is a confessional writer and this novel seems to be Esther's mad self-talk, but in the depth of the madness is a profound self-exploration and self-construction. Esther's self-searching is actually the process of finding subjectivity. However, she needs to confirm herself by the existence of "the other". Moreover, *The Bell Jar* constructed a woman's road to growth, showing her rebellion against a man-dominated society. This paper will use Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism theory to analyze *The Bell Jar* to understand the causes of Esther's internal struggle and the true significance of this mad woman's tragedy.

Keywords: *The Bell Jar*; Self-exploration; "The other"; Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism; Mirror Stage; A Mad Woman

Introduction

The Bell Jar is more than a confessional novel, it is a wry but painful statement of what happens in a society that refuses to take a woman's desires seriously. Esther is a straight-A student at a University in Boston and has been offered an internship at a fashion magazine in New York. Instead, she is confused about life in New York, and the myriad of possibilities leaves her uncertain about her future and unable to return to the life she once thought was safe. Esther eventually decides to become a writer but struggles with the contradictions of morality, behavior, and self-awareness.

Literary works are often related to the writer's own experience. Sylvia Plath committed suicide three weeks after the book was published. Reality and fiction are mapped onto each other. "Literature and mental difference have been bedmates since ancient times...Several critics have attempted to "diagnose" Sylvia Plath with a variety of labels, ranging from bipolarity to depression to schizoaffective disorder." (Rovito 2020) Unlike the historical Sylvia Plath, the fictional Esther Greenwood survives and departs the sanatorium, implying a tentative re-engagement with life. This resolution, however, suggests compromise and tragedy rather than genuine self-realization. The novel's employment of mirror imagery creates a distorted reality in which self-exploration results in misrecognition and the absence of a coherent self. Esther's interactions further underscore her confusion and psychological turmoil. To assess whether she achieves self-subjectivity, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory provides a useful framework.

1. The Mirror Stage and Register Theory of Lacan

The Mirror stage lays a solid foundation for Lacan's theory. Gallop once said, "In an excellent book, the best book devoted to Lacan, Catherine Clement writes: "Lacan, perhaps has never thought anything else besides the mirror stage...It is the germ contains everything." (1982) The mirror stage refers to the fact that a child at six-eighteen months gradually recognizes his images of the mirror. At the beginning, he doesn't know who is reflected by the mirror and even thinks the image belongs to the other. Then, he will know that's him but he doesn't realize it's a fake one. Eventually, he will distinguish reality and illusion. "Through the medium of the mirror, the infant perceives himself as complete. The relationship between the self and the image in the mirror thus constitutes the scope of "the imaginary". A person begins to enter society with that self that is reflected by the mirror in "the imaginary". (Liu 2006) As a child, for example, our mother would point to us in the mirror and say, "Look, what a good kid." From the very beginning, the construction of the self is imbued with otherness. Lacan once said, "The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation - and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopedic - and, lastly, to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development." (Lacan 1977)

That is to say, although the mirroring stage ends at 18 months of age, children continue to weave a more complex self-image based on their relationships with others. This is the human quest for the ideal self and self-integrity.

Three registers, “the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real can be thought of as the three fundamental dimensions of psychical subjectivity à la Lacan.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2022) The newborn baby is closest to the Real, which is “intrinsically elusive, resisting by nature capture in the comprehensibly meaningful formulations of concatenations of Imaginary-Symbolic signs. It is, as Lacan stresses again and again, an “impossibility” vis-à-vis reality.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2022) Lacan developed the theory of the mirror phase as “the Imaginary” a world of joy, satisfaction, and belonging. There is the baby itself, the image in the mirror, and “the mother” (In this context, the mother can refer to other close people). When infants pass the age of 18 months, they begin to learn the language. During this period, infants are forced to separate from their mothers and accept the presence of their fathers. They experience a sense of loss and lack and are forced to accept the oppressive authority of their father in the family, also known as Name-of-the-Father. Although these three registers were divided by time at the beginning, but they are intermingled and unified.

2. Sylvia Plath and *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath, a talented writer, also embarked on a journey of self-discovery. In Plath’s childhood, her father’s death profoundly impacted her. When her mother informed her of his death, she said decisively, “I’ll never speak to God again” (Plath 2011). Later, she met English poet Ted Hughes at Cambridge, and they married, having a son and a daughter. However, their marriage ended due to Ted’s infidelity. Three weeks after the publication of *The Bell Jar*, she committed suicide under various pressures. This poignant life trajectory influenced her poetry and her repeated suicide attempts. Her unique writing style uses metaphors, similes, deviations, personification, and zoosemy to express intense inner feelings, presenting an upside-down and absurd world. “The bell jar” is a container that is used for storing the dead baby or unborn baby in the hospital. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath wrote, “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream.” (Plath 2005) The bell jar symbolizes the oppressive patriarchal society, with Esther, Plath, and similar women likened to dead babies suffocating within it.

3. The Imaginary—A person in the bell jar

The construction of self begins in “the Imaginary.” Esther first encounters the bell jar in the hospital and calmly observes it, unlike most girls who might be frightened. She learns about the stages of fetal development, symbolizing that her own spiritual growth is stunted like the dead baby trapped within. In psychiatric terms, losing a father in childhood impedes a girl’s passage through the Oedipal stage, leaving her emotionally stuck in the Electra complex and hindering psychological development. Additionally, Esther’s depression is compounded by her mother’s neglect and influence. Her mother’s expectations, such as favoring shorthand over poetry and enforcing traditional gender norms, reflect her own limitations and fail to support Esther’s aspirations, further stifling her growth. Her mother even cut out a newspaper article entitled “In Defense of Chastity” and sent it to Esther. It “gave all the reasons a girl shouldn’t sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married”. (Plath 2005) This rigid lecture left Esther confused about female identity and gender relations. The ideal self imposed by her mother, as a minor other, conflicts with Esther’s true self, fueling her alienation and sparking her journey to self-discovery.

The mirrored relationship also manifests in her experiences with other girls in New York. Doreen is a flirtatious woman, while Esther feels that “Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others.” (Plath 2005) However, when she saw Doreen and Lenny flirting with each other, she left Lenny’s house quickly. She knew she didn’t want to be a woman like Doreen and didn’t need a partner like Lenny. Besides, there is another female character Jay See, their boss. She has brains but an ugly appearance. “She read a couple of languages and knew all quality writers in the business.” (Plath 2005) But Esther cannot imagine Jay Cee in bed with her fat husband. Jay Cee was her role model at work, but not the person she wanted to be either. These women all exist as mirrors and little “others” (objet petit à). They all made Esther distinguish between illusion and reality, and push her to move forward to the symbolic world.

4. The Symbolic—I said I wanted to be a poet

For Esther, “the Symbolic” represents a suffocating patriarchal society where women lack power and freedom. Initially, Esther, who had illusions about love, discovers Buddy’s hypocrisy when he shows her his genitals and desires to see her naked. She rejects him and feels hatred. Buddy, as her first male figure in “the Symbolic,” does not match her expectations. Esther’s attempt to seduce Constantine to challenge the notion of female chastity is futile as he only fondles her, failing to fulfill her desires. Her encounter with Marko, who despises women, further symbolizes patriarchal oppression, exacerbating her sense of misrecognition and loss. All the male characters she met incarnated the nuisance of patriarchal society and constructed the big other suppressed on her, aggravating her misrecognition and sense of loss. she sought a way to lift “the bell jar” and to seek that true self, that is writing. Buddy once said to Esther, “Poem is a piece of dust” (Plath 2005), while Esther considered that “People were made of nothing so much as dust and she couldn’t see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than

writing poems”(Plath 2005), which means she didn’t feel that doctors were nobler than poets. She still wants to persist in her dream of being a poet. This is her rebellion against the symbolic order even though the ending is doomed. Unfortunately, she wasn’t admitted to her dreaming writing course. This step brings her closer to the Real.

5. The Real—I was my own woman

The babies feel the darkness in their mother’s womb, and that makes them feel safe. Esther falls into the dark abyss of depression after being disillusioned with her female identity and patriarchal society. That mirror of hers had long been broken. Besides that, she was not accepted into the writing course of her desires, which pushed her into rattrap. She began to seek the warmth of the darkness like a baby in the womb. Consequently, the shadow was secure and the darkness was her shelter. Esther’s attempt at suicide represents not just a desperate act but a means of seeking relief and rebuilding herself, aiming to be reborn and re-enter the Real world that remains elusive. After being admitted to a mental sanatorium, where she encountered many strange individuals and underwent electroshock therapy, these experiences symbolize the fragmentation of herself, mirroring her internal struggles. Esther ultimately decides to reclaim her autonomy by losing her virginity and obtaining a fitting for birth control, asserting her right to control her body. In this regard, she voluntarily returns to the symbolic, which is the only way her subjectivity can be reconstructed.

6. Destruction or Rebirth?

To put it into a nutshell, Esther’s ending is both a rebirth and potentially dangerous. Sylvia wrote, “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.” (Plath 2005) Esther’s quest for female identity is fundamentally motivated by a desire to achieve the same power as men, yet this pursuit is perpetually mediated by the patriarchal societal structure. Women like Esther remain ensnared by the “Big Other” of a male-dominated society, which continuously shapes and constrains their self-conception. Despite Esther’s endeavours to construct a distinct female subjectivity, her sense of self is perpetually in the shadow of the Other, rendering her true self an ever-elusive ideal. Consequently, it would be better to say that *The Bell Jar* is a story of female growth rather than a novel about female rebellion. In order to cater to “the Big Other” and society, Esther, who seems to have completed the construction of the self-subject, has castrated herself to some extent.

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