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**Woman and Madness in Victorian
Literature: Analyzing Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1963)**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of
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Master II English Language and Culture**

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Dedication 1

Through this hard journey that was full with challenges, success, failure, and joy. I dedicate this dissertation to all my family and my friends and those who supported me and have a hand in making this journey easy for me.

To my beloved parents, my superheroes, thank you for the endless love, prayers, and sacrifice.

Thank you for all the support and courage you've been giving me whenever I feel weak.

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Abstract

This study examines the exploration of female madness under the constraints of the Victorian societal norms by delving into Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and exploring the protagonist's psyche, offering a reflection to the complexities of mental illness and gender roles during that era. The aim is to examine how women's mental health is depicted in the Victorian era, examining the symptoms, causes, and consequences of mental illness, and analyzing female characters in literature and showing how societal attitudes towards women can be the main reason in their descent into madness. The study explores the complex interplay between feminist psychoanalysis and women's experiences of madness in the Victorian age and detailed analysis of Plath's work *The Bell Jar* and the complexities of the protagonist with mental illness, and how societal expectations and patriarchal issues contribute in her psychological breakdown. This study reveals the crucial role that feminist psychoanalysis plays in understanding female madness.

Keywords: feminist psychoanalysis, psyche, gender, madness, norms.

الملخص

رواية الناقد الزجاجة لسيلفيا بلاث واستكشاف نفسية البطلة. تقدم الدراسة انعكاساً للتعقيدات المتعلقة بالأمراض النفسية والأدوار الجنسية خلال تلك الحقبة. الهدف من هذه هو فحص كيفية تصوير الصحة النفسية للنساء في العصر الفيكتوري، من خلال دراسة الأعراض والأسباب والنتائج للأمراض النفسية، وتحليل الشخصيات النسائية في الأدب، وإظهار كيف يمكن للمواقف الاجتماعية تجاه النساء أن تكون السبب الرئيسي في إصابتهن بالجنون. تستكشف الدراسة التفاعل المعقد بين التحليل النفسي النسوي وتجارب النساء مع الجنون في العصر الفيكتوري، مع تحليل مفصل لعمل بلاث الناقد الزجاجة وتعقيدات البطلة المصابة بمرض نفسي، وكيف تساهم التوقعات الاجتماعية والمشكلات الذكورية في انهيارها النفسي. تكشف هذه الدراسة الدور الحاسم الذي يلعبه التحليل النفسي النسوي في فهم الجنون الأنثوي.

الكلمات الرئيسية: التحليل النفسي النسوي، النفس، الجنون، الأعراف.

Resumé

Cette étude examine l'exploration de la folie féminine sous les contraintes des normes sociétales victoriennes en se plongeant dans *La Cloche de détresse* de Sylvia Plath et en explorant la psyché de la protagoniste. Elle offre une réflexion sur les complexités de la maladie mentale et des rôles de genre à cette époque. L'objectif est d'examiner comment la santé mentale des femmes est dépeinte à l'époque victorienne, en analysant les symptômes, les causes et les conséquences de la maladie mentale, ainsi qu'en étudiant les personnages féminins dans la littérature pour montrer comment les attitudes sociétales envers les femmes peuvent être la principale raison de leur descente dans la folie. L'étude explore l'interaction complexe entre la psychanalyse féministe et les expériences des femmes face à la folie à l'âge victorien, avec une analyse détaillée de l'œuvre de Plath, *La Cloche de détresse*, et des complexités de la protagoniste souffrant de maladie mentale, et comment les attentes sociétales et les problèmes patriarcaux contribuent à son effondrement psychologique. Cette étude révèle le rôle crucial que joue la psychanalyse féministe dans la compréhension de la folie féminine.

Mots-clés : psychanalyse féministe, psyché, genre, folie, normes.

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Introduction

The Victorian Era, from 1837-1901, under the rule of Queen Victoria was a period of great change and a transformation in British history, it was a complex and dynamic period marked by industrialization, social class, moral values, literature and art (Seaman). Victorian literature engages with the theme of madness in diverse ways and explores the complexities of mental health, through different narratives and characters. Authors such as Charlotte Bronte, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles Dickens, and Sylvia Plath...etc showed the struggles and experiences of them dealing with mental illness. Also, several authors delved into the impact of societal expectations and gender roles on the mental health of female characters (Did You Know She Was Depressed?).

During the Victorian era, societal expectations and gender roles placed particular constraints on women, making their struggles with mental health issues, particularly madness. Victorian literature often served as a reflection of this. The authors provided a platform to discuss and critique the challenges women faced in a society that ignored and misunderstood their mental health struggles. They use it to explore issues such as gender inequality, women's struggles, and societal expectations placed on women during the Victorian era. Authors explored the theme of women and madness through several works such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

The story symbolizes the restrictive gender roles and suffocating expectations imposed on women in Victorian society. Gilman engaged with this theme and dealt with the effects of traditional gender roles and societal expectations on women's psychological well-being. Writers started to challenge societal norms and explored issues such as women's rights and autonomy (Frank). They attempted to empower women by shedding light on their strength, intelligence, and resilience. Women were expected to be obedient and have limited educational opportunities. Women were expected to marry and do their roles as wives and

mothers, being a loyal wife, a mother, and gentlewoman was considered the hallmark of accomplishment for women (Al Azri). These expectations crafted a rigid framework for women and created a limited role for them.

Statement of the Problem

Female and male writers in the Victorian age dealt with the theme of women and madness with various perspectives influenced by their own experiences, societal roles, and ideologies. Those women writers most frequently are the counterparts to the main characters of the literary works, including Plath in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. The novel explores the protagonist Esther Greenwood's mental health and delves into her own experiences, emotions, and thoughts. Also shows her struggles with societal pressure. Plath's own experiences with mental health infuse the novel with authenticity and make it a deeply personal and poignant work. She had a deeply personal connection to *The Bell Jar*, the author herself battled with depression, the pressure to conform to societal expectations, and her experiences with psychiatric treatment. The novel is a powerful reflection of Plath's own life. Her mental health challenges ultimately led to her tragic death by suicide at the age of 30.

The Bell Jar explores various aspects of mental health, including depression, anxiety, and the impact of the expectations imposed on women on one's life. Plath often expressed a sense of isolation in her writing, the profound sense of isolation in her real life, mirrored in her literary works and that played a significant role in shaping her narrative in *The Bell Jar*, the title itself becomes a powerful metaphor for Esther's sense of detachment from the world. She feels alienated as she grapples with the expectations placed upon her as a woman during that era. Plath offers a profound exploration of the complexities of mental health and its effects on individuals, and how these pressures and lack of understanding of mental health issues led them into madness. This dissertation aims to explore and shed light on the treatment

of women and how literary works of the time reflected and responded to the struggles of women against societal constraints (Thapa).

The Significance of the Study

This study provides a window into the historical context of the Victorian era allowing the understanding of the challenges, societal norms, and gender roles that shaped the life of women during that time period. Also, this research offers a detailed analysis of literary works that explore techniques used by authors to express complex themes related to women and madness. The study examines how female characters are pictured and how women's mental health is depicted in Victorian literature. Furthermore, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the portrayal and treatment of women with mental illness during the Victorian era. It also investigates the relationship between gender roles, societal expectations, and the perception of female madness in Victorian literature.

Literature Review

Previous studies on Victorian literature have primarily focused on themes such as gender roles, social class, and sexuality. However, few have delved into the intersection of women's experiences and mental health issues in Victorian literature. The depiction of women and madness in Victorian literature serves as a rich source for understanding the period's attitudes toward gender, mental health, and the consequences of societal constraints on individual well-being.

Elaine Showalter's *Female Malady* (1985) is an innovative book that examines intersection of gender, mental health and how madness in women was treated in English culture in the period from the 19th century to the mid-20th century. Also, the author examines 'proper' feminine behavior when women were expected to stick to social norms and any deviation from these expectations could lead to stigmatization. Showalter addresses the intersectionality of women's mental health by considering the influence of both gender role

and class on the portrayal of madness in this era. She aims to uncover shifts in the intersection between gender and perceptions of mental health from the 19th to the 20th centuries (Busfield 259-277).

Audre Lorde is an African American writer, feminist, and civil rights activist. Through her exploration of the intersections between identity and oppression, Lorde provides a window into the lives of those marginalized individuals, especially black women and people living with illness or disability in her collection of essays and speeches *sister outsider*. The essays and speeches are deeply personal, offering the readers lived experiences of the writer herself as a black woman, as well as some experiences of those on the margins. She dealt with important themes in the field of Feminist Psychoanalysis including intersectionality, sexism, and class (Lorde 114-123).

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, first published in 1847, a classic Victorian novel that follows the life of the orphaned Jane who faced various hardships. The novel traced her journey from childhood through various stages of her life, beginning by being an orphan mistreated. The narrative effectively captures the growth, struggles, and self-discovery of Jane Eyre from childhood into adulthood. The novel explores the role of women in the 19th century. It also delves into the complexity of female identity and the challenges of traditional gender roles during the Victorian era. The protagonist is depicted as a strong and independent woman, despite facing numerous challenges and societal expectations, although all the hardships she remains true to her principles (“Jane Eyre.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 Apr. 2011).

Methodology

Feminism is a movement that encourages for gender equality and empowerment of women. It includes a variety of perspectives all unified by one common goal of creating an equitable world for people of all genders. In Victorian literature, feminism started to emerge when women began to challenge societal norms and advocate for change (Burkett). The

Victorian era imposed a set of societal norms and expectations on women that were constricting for them, including: limited roles, women were expected to be homemakers and their primary duties were managing the household and raising children, limited educational opportunities, since the prevailing belief was that women's primary role was within the home, women were often discouraged from pursuing higher education institutions, including universities, they also had limited career opportunities as there was a limited range of acceptable occupations such as teaching and nursing. Women were not allowed to be doctors until 1849 when Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman to graduate from medical school (Barret).

The term “New Woman” emerged when women in the latter half of the Victorian era started to challenge traditional gender roles as they began to demand the right to vote. The demand for women's suffrage was a central and pivotal element in the New Woman movement. Many other factors contributed to the rise of the New Woman such as increasing access to education and seeking expanded career opportunities outside traditional gender roles (Mendes). This term was not only a real-world development but also a theme that permeated literary works, authors and artists played a crucial role in shaping the narrative around The New Woman. They started to feature Now Women characters in their novels and stories like George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), this work delves into the complexities of the New Woman during the late Victorian era by presenting a nuanced portrayal of female characters who navigate a changing society (Hayward 51-70).

Psychoanalysis is a comprehensive psychological theory developed by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is the study of the human psyche. It aims to explore the unconscious mind and its influence on behavior. His theories introduced concepts such as the ID, Ego, and Superego. The ID includes the wants and desires, the instinctual aspects of the psyche, the Superego is the voice of consciousness and shows what is right, while the Ego

works according to reality and tries to balance between the Id and the Superego (Cherry). Feminist Psychoanalysis explores the psychoanalytic theories developed by Freud to understand the psychology of women. During the Victorian age, psychoanalysis had not yet been fully developed. However, mental illness in women was often misunderstood and women often labeled as “mad” and the treatment of women during this period was influenced by societal norms and prevailing cultural attitudes including confinement and isolation.

Structure of the Study

The dissertation starts with an introduction. It contains two main chapters. It ends up by a conclusion. Chapter one is entitled “Feminist psychoanalysis and women's madness in the Victorian age.” It deals with the theoretical perspective of feminism and psychoanalysis. It shows how the concept of “women’s madness” is viewed through a feminist lens and how women’s mental health was frequently misunderstood. More importantly, it explains how women were confined by rigid gender roles and limited opportunities. Chapter two is called “A feminist psychoanalytic exploration of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath.” It is an analysis of *The Bell Jar* by Plath. It discusses how Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, dealt with the complexities of mental health issues, identity, and societal expectations for women in the 1950s. The conclusion is a recap of the main findings and a conclusion of the study.

Chapter One

Feminist Psychoanalysis and Women's Madness in the Victorian Age

Introduction

Feminism is a movement that advocates for equality between genders and social justice worldwide. It has developed to address the intersecting forms of oppression faced by women and marginalized communities. In an era marked by social, cultural, and technological changes, feminist psychoanalysis continues in being a relevant and important field of study. It represents a critical approach in understanding human psychology through the lens of gender, power dynamics, and social structure, and how they influence individual experiences and behaviors (Hogsett). This chapter delves into the meaning, significance, and implications of Feminist and Psychoanalysis theories and examines the contribution of Feminist Psychoanalysis by shedding light on the complex interplay between gender and psyche (Grabe). This chapter also deals with feminist perspectives on psychology, including intersectionality and critics of traditional gender norms.

Waves of Feminism

Since its emergence in the late 19th century, the feminist movement has faced transitional phase marked by various waves, first wave (late 19th to early 20th century) focused on legal inequalities including the right to vote and access to higher education (Kalsem et al. 141-142.). The second wave (1960s to 1980s) tackled issues such as sexuality, family, and the workplace. In that period the feminist movement began to challenge traditional gender roles and advocating for women's liberation. This wave also saw the rise of Consciousness-raising groups (CR groups) providing space for women to discuss their experiences with gender discrimination. The third wave feminism emerged in the 1990s and continues to the present day, highlighting intersectionality, and diversity. This wave includes also media

representation, which refers to the depiction of women and gender issues in various forms of media, including television, literature, and news (Snyder).

New Trends of Feminism

The feminist movement has always been dynamic and the new trends continuously evolve and address issues in social, political, and cultural landscapes. These trends include intersectionality; this concept was coined by the scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who argued that gender inequality cannot be understood in isolation from other forms of oppression such as race and class. In 1991, she wrote a paper called “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” In her paper, she talked about how traditional feminism and anti-racist frameworks fail to fully capture the experiences of black women (Crenshaw 139-167). She dealt with how black women’s experiences differ from general women’s experiences because of the intersection between these two marginalized communities.

Digital Feminism

Moreover, Digital Feminism has become the focus in recent years. Digital space has allowed feminists to advocate for gender equality. It seeks to challenge patriarchal norms and utilize the power of technology to advance feminist goals and amplify marginalized voices (Mendes, 2019). Body positivity has also been a part of these new trends in Feminism, emphasizing the acceptance of all body types. It advocates for self-love, acceptance, and empowerment to create a world where all individuals of diverse sizes, shapes, and identities feel comfortable, valued, and respected. Feminism and body positivity aim to create space for all marginalized individuals to challenge societal standards (Griffin).

Understanding Women’s Mental Health through an Intersectional Lens

Feminist psychoanalysis is a significant framework for understanding women’s mental health via an intersectional perspective by recognizing and addressing how various intersecting identities, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and more, that impact

women's experiences of mental health and well-being (Lolas). These experiences can consist of:

1- **Marginalization**

Women who are members of marginalized groups may hold out extra forms of oppression and discrimination, which can have a serious negative effect on their mental health for example, a black woman may experience discrimination based on both her race and gender, Crenshaw states that: "Intersectionality draws attention to the various ways that social inequality is experienced. It is not simply a matter of additive discrimination – that is, discrimination suffered by, say, black and female but rather a compound of discrimination" (Bellamy).

2- **The Interplay of Trauma and Violence in Women's Mental Health**

Trauma and Violence pose serious effects on women's mental well-being, involving various forms such as physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological mistreatment. The effect of trauma and violence on women's mental health, including stress disorders, depression, and anxiety, can result in long-term emotional distress. Women who have experienced these obstacles may also struggle with low self-respect and confidence and have negative thoughts about themselves which lead to feelings of worthless and weakness (Srivastava). Also, they may face difficulties in relationships and interaction with others because of the trust issues they have. The pressure of trauma and violence can take a toll on the body and lead to physical health problems such as headaches and gastrointestinal issues. Dr. Christine Courtoi ssaid: "Trauma and Violence are not just events in a woman's life; they are threads woven into the fabric of her mental health, shaping her sense of self, her relationships, and her resilience."

3- The Influence of Cultural and Social Expectations on Women's Mental Health

The complexities of cultural and social norms may influence women's experiences of mental well-being. The expectations can influence various aspects of women's lives such as self-perception, personal relationships like partners and family members, body image, and women's attitudes towards their bodies, and how they express their emotions in various contexts. In many societies, women are frequently required to fulfill traditional gender roles such as caretaking and homemaking, and that can lead to pressure and inadequacy (Vatila). Beauty standards, sexuality, and emotional expression can create many challenges for women's mental well-being, due to several factors such as pressure to fulfill societal beauty standards and the difficulty in expressing certain emotions like anger, assertiveness, or ambition (Miralrio).

Psychoanalysis Overview and Sigmund Freud

Psychoanalysis, or in other words, the "talk cure," is a method used to treat psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. Freud believed that the mind is like an iceberg; most of it is hidden and below the level of consciousness the initial part of "Psychoanalysis: Understanding the Unconscious Mind" presents a concise overview of the origins of psychoanalysis. Freud is introduced as the pioneer of psychoanalysis, and his contributions become the focal point of the remaining chapters. This section also establishes the book's primary purpose by providing definitions for psychoanalysis and the unconscious aspects of the mind. It mentions Freud's utilization of various techniques, including dream interpretation. While mentioning criticism towards psychoanalysis from modern researchers, the section refrains from naming specific individuals. The chapter concludes by acknowledging that the effectiveness of psychoanalysis continues to be a topic of discussion today alongside other contemporary perspectives. Overall, readers are provided with an

informative and broad summary that aids in their comprehension of the extensive and multifaceted subject matter (Sayers).

Societal Expectations Placed on Women in the Victorian Era

The Victorians held conflicting views on women, perceiving them either as virtuous, nurturing figures within the household or as immoral individuals residing in the lowest strata of society. Despite the clearly defined societal expectations for Victorian women, their actual roles often clashed with these ideals. The treatment of women and their diverse roles within society can be observed through the concept of motherhood, which was a prevalent theme in both literature and society during that era. From its inception, psychoanalysis has delved into the idea of motherhood (Jumana).

Freud also introduced the concept of the Electra complex, suggesting that girls experienced sexual attraction towards their fathers, viewing their mothers as rivals for their father's affections and attention – a theory derived from Freud's belief in women's envy of male genitalia. These concepts developed in an environment that rigidly adhered to gender norms and witnessed an increasing recognition of neuroses, largely due to the contributions of psychoanalysts like Freud. Consequently, it is unsurprising that society harbored a significant bias against women (Wikipedia). Freud's theories were not conceived in isolation but rather emerged from the cultural context of their time. Therefore, it is of great interest to English literature students to explore how Feminist Psychoanalysis can present an alternative perspective on both literature and society in the Victorian era.

Feminist Psychoanalysis

Feminist Psychoanalysis, a term used since the 1960s or earlier, has gained renewed significance due to recent advancements in critical theory, gender studies, and the history of psychology and psychiatry. These fields have uncovered evidence suggesting that psychologists' ideas and practices can unintentionally discriminate against women. As

awareness grows regarding the portrayal of motherhood in literature and Freud's construction of an ideal matriarchy rooted in male desire, along with criticisms raised by feminism and other theories, the future of Feminist Psychoanalysis appears promising. A significant step forward for the field is the critical exploration of the supposedly repressed history of female authorship in the 19th century. When examining Psychoanalysis in the Victorian age, it is crucial to consider the integration of cultural and diversity perspectives. By analyzing societal expectations and restrictions, insights can be gained into how these factors influenced women's experiences and shaped their identities during that time.

Cultural Sensitivity

The application of cultural sensitivity allows for a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics at play. Additionally, exploring trauma-focused psychoanalysis helps in comprehending the potential psychological impact of the restrictive gender roles and societal pressures prevalent in Victorian society. By incorporating these contemporary trends into the study of psychoanalysis in the Victorian era, it is able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological experiences of individuals during that time. In that period, women faced many societal expectations and restrictions, they were often seen as delicate and in need of protection, which limited their freedom and independence (Barett).

Feminist Psychoanalysis and its Significance in Addressing Women's Mental Health

Issues

Feminist psychoanalysis acknowledges that women's mental health cannot be understood without delving social, political, and cultural forces that shape their lives. It is important to understand women's mental health and this cannot be in isolation from the contexts in which they live, this means that individual experiences of psychological discomfort or well-being are influenced by external circumstances rather than internal elements

like personal history. The experiences of women are shaped by structural injustices including sexism, racism, and heteronormativity and that leads to mental health disparities (Lorde).

Women's Experiences with Mental Illness

Feminist psychoanalysis examines how these societal norms influenced women's experiences and shaped their identities. It delves into the subconscious mind, exploring how women's desires and struggles were influenced by the patriarchal society they lived in (Wright). It is fascinating to see how these ideas were reflected in literature from that time, and this literary work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* delves into the psychological struggles of a woman who is confined to a room and forbidden from writing or engaging in any intellectual activities. Through a feminist lens, the story explores the protagonist's gradual descent into madness, highlighting the effects of societal oppression and the stifling of her creativity and autonomy. It's a powerful exploration of the female experience and the impact of patriarchal norms on women's mental health. The protagonist's journey with mental illness was easy at first as it begins with feelings of stress and mood swings until it turns into something serious and can't be controlled. As these emotions started to grow she became no more able to be normal and have the ability to function her daily activities. The protagonist's experiences with mental illness serves as a powerful example of other women's struggles as they experience almost the same obstacles (Moss).

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre is a well-known Victorian novel that was published in 1847. It follows the life of Jane Eyre, an orphan who faces numerous challenges and difficulties. The book focuses on Jane's personal growth and development as she navigates through various stages of her life. One of the prominent themes explored in *Jane Eyre* is the role of gender and societal expectations. Jane challenges traditional gender norms by asserting her independence and

pursuing her own happiness. Bronte presents Jane as a strong and resilient character who defies societal expectations for women during that time.

Social class is another significant theme in the novel, as Jane, an orphan of low social status, experiencing discrimination and prejudice from those of higher social standing. Bronte highlights the injustices of the class system and emphasizes the importance of inner worth and character over external wealth and social status. The novel also delves into the complexities of love and relationships. Jane's romance with Mr. Rochester, despite their differences in age and social class, demonstrates the power of emotional connection and genuine affection. It raises questions about the ethics of love and the importance of personal integrity in relationships. Bronte's writing style in *Jane Eyre* is characterized by vivid descriptions and a strong narrative voice. The novel features atmospheric settings, such as Thornfield Hall, which contribute to the overall gothic atmosphere of the story.

In Victorian society, women were often expected to conform to strict social norms and were limited in their roles and opportunities. This repression and lack of agency could have profound effects on their mental well-being. In *Jane Eyre*, this theme is reflected in the character of Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's first wife. Bertha is depicted as a woman who has descended into madness, locked away in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Her madness is often interpreted as a manifestation of the constraints and oppression she faced as a woman in that era. Bertha's character serves as a symbol of the consequences of societal expectations and the repression of women's desires and autonomy. By exploring the theme of madness in relation to women, Charlotte Bronte sheds light on the detrimental effects of patriarchal structures and the limited roles available to women during the Victorian era ("Jane Eyre." Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 Apr. 2011).

***Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys**

Wide Sargasso Sea is a novel that was written by Jean Rhys and published in 1966. The novel serves as a preface to Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre* it narrates the tale of Antoinette Cosway, who later becomes Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. The author explores Antoinette's mind in detail, revealing the many aspects of colonial oppression and the patriarchal domination that have shaped her life. In colonial Jamaica, Antoinette, a white Creole woman, struggles with a strong sense of displacement and alienation. Her central struggle is her quest for a sense of belonging as she faced rejection from both the white European community and the black Caribbean community.

Antoinette's arranged marriage was one of the main reasons of her descent into madness, Antoinette's relationship with her husband is an example of patriarchal dominance and control, in her marriage she sees a chance to overcome her emotions of alienation and find a place where she belongs, and a chance of love and acceptance. However, her wishes dashed and instead of finding love and acceptance, she is met with rejection and marginalization, deepening her feelings of alienation and isolation (Carriere).

Women's Hysteria

In the Victorian era, psychoanalysis was practiced in a society that valued surface behavior and hidden secrets. Hysteria was a common condition during this time, and psychoanalysts focused on treating it. Freud conducted important case studies on hysteria and its origins, which laid the foundation for psychoanalysis. Women's Hysteria and Psychoanalysis Development in the Victorian Era After, it has become evident that in the 19th century, women from various social, cultural, and age groups were frequently diagnosed with trauma. However, during the Victorian era, the number of diagnoses reached such high levels that this condition was viewed as a significant problem. This analysis is steeped in the prevailing societal expectations and experiences of women during that time. It is worth noting

that at the time, no effective solution to this issue was identified. Counseling methods were developed, and some suggest that the emergence of this condition demonstrates the constraints imposed on women's freedom and autonomy by the rigid and outdated Victorian culture (Cohut).

Hysteria, a disorder with a long-standing presence in the lives of women across the globe, used to be a widely recognized illness until the 19th century. In ancient times, it served as a subject of fascination for medical researchers and physicians. However, there is a lack of substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness of such treatments for this condition. Hysteria is often viewed as primarily affecting women. The term "hysteria" has its origins in the concept of the uterus and is considered the first mental disorder attributed to women. Ancient philosophers such as Plato and Hippocrates perceived the womb as a living creature. Hippocrates went so far as to propose that the uterus could wander within the body, causing limbs and chest to become constricted in an event referred to as "suffocation of the womb." Throughout Western history, the uterus has been culturally associated with female identity and has held great significance. From this perspective, it is apparent that the clinical understanding and treatment of hysteria have evolved, shaping the prevailing notions of femininity. Consequently, the portrayal of hysteria has prompted a reflection on the limitations imposed on women and has prompted research aimed at exploring the factors and stereotypes influencing femininity (Papalia).

Conclusion

Feminist psychoanalysis focuses on the social mechanisms that support women's suffering and provides insightful understanding of women's experiences with madness. Researchers have shed light on the ways in which patriarchal standards affect women's psychological struggles, they stress the significance of intersectionality, recognising that in addition to gender, other intersecting axes of oppression such as race, class, sexual

orientation, and others also influence women's experiences of madness, and women's mental health cannot be separated from their lived experiences. Feminist psychoanalysis provides a more complex perspective on mental illness (Murdoch) . This chapter illuminated the interactions between society systems and personal experiences.

Chapter Two

A Feminist Psychoanalytic Exploration of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath.

Introduction

The Bell Jar is a brilliant critique of the 1950s treatment of women. Within the pages of Plath's nostalgic novel, it captivates readers with its honest examination of different themes such as identity, portrayal of mental illness, gender roles, and the oppressive boundaries of societal expectations. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, through her journey the author shows the story of a young woman who struggles with the expectations of women in the 1950s and being lost between the desire of personal fulfillment and enjoying her youth or traditional gender roles. Esther is presented to us as a bright young woman who is starting a summer internship in New York City and is full of hopes for happiness and success to a woman that deals with many internal struggles from her failure in her relationships with friends and lovers to her feelings of alienation and marginalization. Beside the novel is a deterioration of Esther's inner monologues and her mind (Martin).

It is essential to understand the life of the women behind the pen. The story was so close to Plath's actual life, since her own life experiences are deeply interconnected with the protagonist of the novel. Also, many of the events that showed in the novel are drawn directly from Plath's own life. Plath, born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, she was an American poet, novelist, and short-story writer whose works are well-known for their emotional depth, clarity, and honesty. Tragically, her life was short when she killed herself on February 11, 1963, at the age of 30. Moreover, Plath's own experiences with mental illness informed her perspectives as a writer. Her struggles with emotional turmoil and despair, anxiety, depression, and self-doubt are clearly reflected in her writings. Also, the gender role in the novel allows Feminist Psychoanalysis to shed important light on the work, and helps

understand how Esther's internal struggles such as the fear of losing her identity reflect the issues faced by women at that time (Budick).

Unveiling Themes of the Novel

The Bell Jar is such a powerful novel that has many different themes that shape both the character and the novelist development. These themes work together to create a rich and complex combination that sheds light on the difficulties of the protagonist Esther Greenwood and her struggle with mental health in a society that ignores and does not recognize those with mental health issues. These themes are clearly seen in the novel through her interaction with other characters, and through these interactions Plath explores these themes in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath goes into the depth of the protagonist's psychological turmoil, allowing readers to understand the protagonist's psyche. The most significant themes shaped in the novel may include:

1- Gender Roles

In *The Bell Jar*, gender roles play a significant role in Esther Greenwood's life. She is expected to conform to traditional expectations of femininity, such as getting married, having children, and being a homemaker. However, Esther resists these societal pressures and struggles to find her own identity outside of these gender roles. She yearns for independence, ambition, and intellectual fulfillment, which goes against the limited options available to women during that time. Esther said: "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way" (Plath 88); this quote showcases Esther's resistance to the traditional role of women as subservient to men. She rejects the notion of being defined by her relationship to men and instead seeks to establish her own identity and independence. Another quotation from the novel that shows how gender roles negatively influenced Esther's life "I wanted to be where

nobody I knew could ever come” (Plath 6); this quote reflects Esther's desire to escape the confines of societal expectations and gender roles (“Gender and Society in *The Bell Jar*”).

2- Identity Formation

Identity formation is shown in Esther’s journey of discovering her true identity, through her life experiences the author showed the complexities of self-discovery. From her internship in New York City to being in a mental institution, her life when she moved to New York has completely changed and effected by several factors such as her relationships. As a young woman she was obliged and pressured by achieving success in all the fields of her life, she was feeling confused between her own desires and the demands of the society. Esther was seeking for independence and being free from the expectations and needs of her friends, family, and society, her desire to be free drives her to pressure. The protagonist lived a series of experiences and through these experiences she discovered her fears, insecurities, and uncertainties.

The author also showed how these life experiences led to the feelings of depression and anxiety and how they affect one’s perception of reality and self-discovery. She yearns for freedom and independence, wanting to break free from the limitations placed upon her as a woman. When Esther said: "I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life” (Plath 131); this quote vividly depicts Esther's sense of losing herself and feeling disconnected from her own identity. It reflects her struggle to maintain a sense of self amidst the pressures and expectations of society. Throughout the novel, Esther embarks on a journey of self-discovery, grappling with her own identity and searching for a place where she truly belongs (Schommer)

3- The portrayal of Mental Illness

Mental illness is a central theme in the novel, through the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, the author digs into her personal experiences and the way she was descent into

depression and her complexities with mental illness and also the effect of her experiences on her mental well-being. The author sheds light into the protagonist's feelings of alienation and her sense of detachment from herself and the world around her. Plath navigates the pressures of relationships on Esther's mental health. The demands of the people around her as a young woman in the 1950s were against her own desires. Greenwood's relationships with her family members, especially her mother was the main reason that affects her mental state, the relationship of Esther with her mother was built upon misunderstandings and tensions. *The Bell Jar* stands as a good example of the impact of mental illness on individuals and society (Rwgoli).

4- Double Standards

This theme took an important role on explaining how women and men faced the societal challenges and how each one were treated by the society is the double standard in *The Bell Jar* prominent theme. Which explores the disparity in how men and women are judged and treated based on their actions and choices. Esther, the main character, grapples with societal expectations and the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. Throughout the story, Esther encounters double standards in various aspects of her life, such as sexuality, relationships, and ambitions. She realizes that men are often praised for their behavior, while women are judged and criticized for the same actions. This double standard creates a sense of frustration and a feeling of being trapped for Esther, contributing to her inner conflicts (GradesFixer).

Plath skillfully portrays the unfairness of the double standard and its impact on Esther's journey of self-discovery and identity formation in *The Bell Jar* when she pictured the protagonist saying this quote: "I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like

Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat” (Plath 94). This quote encapsulates the frustration Esther feels as she observes the societal expectations placed on women. It portrays the double standard where men often desire women to conform to traditional roles and expectations after marriage, despite the initial romantic gestures. The quote powerfully captures the theme of the double standard in the novel.

Examination of the Societal Norms and Expectations Placed on Women in the 1950s

The period of the 1950s stands as a remarkable period in history characterized by several factors such as societal expectations and norms, particularly when it comes to the roles of women. They were expected to do their domestic role which is keeping and taking care of the home, raising children and doing their roles as mothers, and fulfilling the needs of their husbands (Women in the 1950s. “Khan Academy.”) Plath in *The Bell Jar* explored the pressures and cultural ideals that shaped the lives of women during that time through the journey of the protagonist Esther Greenwood, by showing her struggles with the expectations placed upon her by her society. She showed how it is hard to be an independent woman, resilient, and having the ability to make decisions despite the circumstances and the expectations that may restrict her to traditional gender roles. Also, the hardship of being a woman and making decisions in your life in a young age “In the novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath writes,

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story...One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an

Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and among these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. (Plath 20)

Esther liked a fig-tree in another story and compared it with her life and every fig on that tree represents a different life path for her, and at the end she can only choose one fig (“Sylvia Plath and the Fig Tree Metaphor: A Symbol of Choice and Identity.” 2023).

How the Novel Addresses Issues of Power Dynamics

The Bell Jar provides a moving examination of power dynamics by highlighting the way in which societal norms and relationships shape individual experience, especially when it comes to societal expectations placed on women during the period of 1950s and 1960s. Esther Greenwood struggles with the pressure to stick to traditional gender roles. She is influenced by social construction of femininity which shapes her actions, aspirations, and sense of self. Esther was expected to prioritize motherhood and marriage over her ambitions and personal goals. Moreover, Plath explores power dynamics through personal relationships by shedding light into Esther's interactions with men. All the relationships with men she had exert control over her life, shaping her decisions and self-worth. Throughout the novel, Esther suffers with feelings of self-doubts due to the demands and expectations placed on her by the men in her life. Plath emphasizes how gender roles and societal expectations impact the power dynamics between men and women (Espinosa).

Character Analysis

Understanding Esther Greenwood's Internal Struggles in *The Bell Jar*

Plath provides a glimpse to the protagonist's internal confusion by going deep to her experiences and her complexities such as mental health and the quest for identity. One of the central conflicts consists in societal expectation and the pressure of the people telling her how she should behave and what her role in society should be. She struggles to achieve her own desires and live the way her mind tells her, being in a conflict to conform traditional gender

roles, marriage and motherhood or independence and self-fulfillment, which leads to her feelings of alienation and depression.

The author explored also the theme of body image as one of the protagonist's internal struggles, Esther faces steady pressure to live up to an impossible standard in her experiences in the fashion world, where physical beauty is crucial. Esther's perception of her body becomes false as she interacts with other characters like her mother who personifies conventional ideas of femininity and insists in sticking to societal expectations of attractiveness, an example of that is when her mother insists on wearing a particular dress in the event, for Esther it is just a dress but for her mother it represents is a symbol of beauty and femininity. Also, Esther's friend Doreen challenges her insecurities about her body. When she introduced Doreen in chapter one she said: "Doreen . . . had bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer . . . as if all the people around her were pretty silly and she could tell some good jokes on them if she wanted to" (Plath 4-5), this quote shows clearly that she admires the character of Doreen and her self-confidence which affects the way she sees herself, and her feelings towards Doreen reflect her own internal struggles (Kibin).

How the Societal Expectations Influence the Protagonist's Psyche

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Plath's *The Bell Jar* is profoundly influenced by societal expectations throughout the novel. Here's a detailed exploration of how these expectations shape her psyche:

- 1- Pressure to conform:** Esther feels immense pressure to conform to societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles. She is expected to excel academically, marry, and fulfill the roles of wife and mother. However, Esther struggles with

these expectations, feeling suffocated by the limitations they impose on her ambitions and desires.

- 2- **Ambivalence towards Motherhood:** Esther grapples with society's expectation that women should aspire to motherhood. While she acknowledges the importance of motherhood, she is ambivalent about it personally. This conflict between societal expectations and her own desires contributes to her sense of alienation and confusion.
- 3- **Expectations of Success:** As a young woman in the 1950s, Esther is expected to pursue a successful career while also maintaining her femininity and domestic responsibilities. However, she finds herself disillusioned with the prospect of success, feeling trapped by the pressure to excel in a male-dominated world.
- 4- **Double Standards:** Esther observes the double standards that exist within society, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. She resents the way women are judged more harshly for their actions and desires compared to men, which further exacerbates her feelings of injustice and disillusionment.
- 5- **Struggles with Identity:** The weight of societal expectations causes Esther to struggle with her identity and sense of self-worth. She feels pressure to project an image of success and happiness, even as she grapples with feelings of inadequacy and despair. This internal conflict ultimately leads to her mental breakdown and descent into depression.

Overall, societal expectations play a significant role in shaping Greenwood's psyche in *The Bell Jar*, influencing her thoughts, actions, and sense of self throughout the novel (Farzanf).

The portrayal of mental illness and the protagonist's experience with mental illness

In *The Bell Jar* by Plath, the protagonist's mental illness is portrayed through this quote: "I felt very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo." This quote vividly captures the protagonist's sense of detachment and emptiness, comparing it to the calm center of a storm. It reflects the overwhelming nature of her mental illness and the disconnection she feels from the chaotic world around her. In his book, the bell jar by Sylvia Plath, explores the theme of detachment and its impact on the protagonist's mental health. It delves into the protagonist's struggle with feeling disconnected from the world around her and the toll it takes on her well-being. The narrative provides a poignant portrayal of the effects of detachment and the challenges it presents in finding a sense of belonging and purpose.

Esther Greenwood experiences significant mental health struggles throughout the novel. Her experiences with depression, anxiety, and existential angst are portrayed in detail, reflecting the author's own struggles with mental illness. Mental health deteriorates as she grapples with societal expectations, the pressure to conform to gender roles, and the stifling atmosphere of the 1950s. Her experiences, though set in the mid-20th century, resonate with themes of repression, societal constraints, and the stifling nature of Victorian-era expectations.

In the Victorian era, mental illness was often misunderstood and stigmatized. Women, in particular, faced immense pressure to adhere to strict social norms, which could exacerbate feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Esther's experiences reflect this broader societal context, highlighting the damaging effects of societal expectations on individual mental health.

The Protagonist's Relationships with Men and Women and how they Influence Her Understanding of Herself and Her Place in the World

Plath in her novel said: "Thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow, the million moving shapes and cul-de-sacs of shadow. There was shadow in bureau drawers and closets and suitcases, and shadow under houses and trees and stones, and shadow at the back of people's eyes and smiles, and shadow, miles and miles and miles of it, on the night side of the earth." This quote reflects Esther's contemplation of the complexities and nuances within herself and the world around her, influenced by her interactions with both men and women. Her relationships with men and women play a crucial role in her character development and exploration of societal norms. She faces pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, leading to feelings of disillusionment. Her interactions with men like Buddy Willard illustrate her struggle with romantic relationships within societal boundaries (Deiterman).

Esther has a complex relationship with him, Buddy's inability to support her and give importance to her interests for example in poetry when he said: "Do you know what a poem is? Esther" "No, what?" Esther said. He answered: "A piece of dust", this shows that Buddy doesn't care about emotions and it reflects his character and his relationship with Esther. Conversely, her friendships with women such as Doreen and Joan offer moments of camaraderie and solidarity amidst societal pressures, though they're also complicated by jealousy and competition. Doreen shows Esther the world of enjoyment, parties, alcohol, and random relationships with random boys. Esther admires Doreen's confident personality and not being stressed by society and its pressure. After the feeling of the impression Esther recognizes the danger of Doreen's lifestyle and that she could waste her future if she tries to be live like her and trying to escape from reality. Overall, these relationships serve as a lens to

examine themes of identity and societal expectations, contributing to Esther's journey of self-discovery and shaping her worldview (Smith 551-55).

The author in the novel stated: “But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get.” This quote reflects Esther's struggle with societal pressures and expectations, including those imposed by men like Buddy Willard, who represents traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity. It reflects how she always felt herself under pressures and she wanted to be perfect it was a hard competition between her and her inside self and that’s was because of the influence of men and female characters in her life like her mother and Buddy Willard. This quote: "I wanted to crawl in between those black lines of print, the way you crawl through a fence, and go to sleep under that beautiful big green fig-tree” reflects Esther's admiration for a passage in a novel, suggesting her desire for escape and connection with literature, which is often associated with the influence of female writers and characters in her life, such as her mother and her college mentor.

She was influenced by both women and men in her journey towards self-awareness. Women such as her mother, Doreen, and Mrs. Willard provide contrasting perspectives on femininity, societal expectations, and independence, shaping Esther's understanding of her own identity as a woman. Men like Buddy Willard and Marco contribute to Esther's exploration of relationships, sexuality, and societal pressures. Overall, the interactions with both genders help Esther navigate her place in the world and understand the complexities of gender roles and expectations (Schwarzbaum 503-518).

Delving into Symbols in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*

The most significant symbol in the novel is *The Bell Jar* itself, as it represents the sense of isolation and being unable to fully engage with society. Also, it’s a metaphor for

Esther's mental health and her struggles with societal expectations. It stands for the invisible wall that alienates her from the world outside and being confined to her own thoughts and emotions in a non-understanding society. *The Bell Jar* serves as a symbol liberation and self-discovery. She seeks to break free from the expectations imposed on her and embraces her own identity (Batten).

The Fig Tree is another expressive symbol in the novel, which represents Esther's struggle to find a meaning and a right path in her life, marriage, career, motherhood and many others. Esther desire was impossible and it's to choose all the paths, but choosing one meant losing all the rest with the fear of making the wrong decision. And beside all these choices there's a reality that she is surrounded by expectations that dictate her future and which path she will choose.

The Journey of Sylvia Plath's Self-Discovery

Sylvia Plath's Life

Plath is one of the most prominent feminist confessional poets. The American novelist was born on October 27, 1932, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S. She was the first born of her family. She was a brilliant and ambitious, and had a complex and a depressed personality. Her father, Otto Plath, a German immigrant and a respected entomologist and professor, he died after a week from her eighth birthday. She was raised Christian, but after her father's death she lost her faith. Her mother, Aurelia Plath, was her supporter who encouraged her literary ambitions ("Sylvia Plath- Poems, Death and *The Bell Jar*," 2021).

The Personal Echoes in Plath's Work

Her writing interests started at an early age, she published her first poem at age of eight. Plath has a deeply personal poets that explore themes such as; mental health, family and relationships, identity, and feminism. Her poems and novels are filled with experiences from her own life including event, relationships, and emotions. *The Bell Jar* is a semi-

autobiographical novel which draws clearly event from Plath's own experiences. The similarities between her and the protagonist of the novel Esther are clearly shown throughout the journey of the protagonist her life, her career, her ambitions, and her death are quite similar. Also, the themes depicted in *The Bell Jar* such as societal expectations, the role of women, and mental illness, which were all major issues in Plath's life. The author captures in the novel perfectly her personal struggles and her feelings. Throughout the story of Esther, the author shows her envy to men's freedom and the idea of serving men in any way and the expectations imposed to her like becoming pregnant and having to be a mother and taking care of the house and the children.

Plath also mirrors the struggles of identity and finding the true self in a world that dictates her behaviors and her future. She shows the difficulties of a young woman who tries to define herself in a society with a very harsh mindset. The desire of writing poetry and at the same time being pressured to do her role as a mother affects Plath's mental well-being, the fear from the future and making the wrong decision are one of the main reasons in Plath's mental illness and these are clearly portrayed in the novel through Esther's character. Furthermore, isolation in the novel serves as a strong symbol of Esther's detachment from the world and shows how bad can fear affect one's life and dictate people's actions and emotions (Thapa).

The life of Plath and *The Bell Jar* are connected in many ways, not only the themes but even the events that happened in Plath's life were captured also in the character of Esther, for instance both Sylvia and Esther lost their father at an early age. Also, Plath came from Boston to New York City after graduation to a prestigious internship at Madmoiselle magazine and Esther won an internship on a glamorous New York magazine, and there were they first met with the feelings of excitement about the new lifestyle of and the opportunities of this beautiful city, but soon they face the harsh reality that this impression is temporary and

it's just at the beginning now they are obliged to face the pressure of choosing a path for the future and facing the expectations of the society they live in. these mixed emotions led them to the worst feelings a person could ever feel which are anxiety and depression, to being alienated and disconnected from the world and people around them.

Relationships also played a big part in Sylvia and Esther's characters and shape their minds and thoughts. As in every person's life there are positive and supportive relationships that bring comfort and joy for both Plath and Esther, and negative relationships that affect their psychological well-being. Plath and Esther's connection with their families especially their fathers was a primary reason in their break downs, for Plath the death of her father in a young age was a big trauma for her that she couldn't get over. For Esther she suffered from her parent's expectations that were against her ambitions and created a big pressure for her. Emotional relationships also, Plath's failed marriage to Ted and the betrayal she experienced destroyed her confidence in people and led to her disconnection from the world around her. Esther's romantic relationships especially with Buddy Willard the toxic character that breaks her self-confidence with his arrogance and selfishness. These relationships were the main reason in their feelings of depression and anxiety and struggles with mental illness.

Sylvia Plath's Tragic Death

Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* is seen as semi-autobiographical, drawing heavily from her own experiences, including her struggles with mental illness and her eventual suicide. Plath spirals into a deep depression, feeling trapped and suffocated by societal expectations and her own inner turmoil. As she grapples with her mental health, the people around her, including her friends and family, either fail to understand her struggles or exacerbate her feelings of isolation. In her final days, Plath's despair reaches its peak, and she makes *the bell jar*. Esther's descent into madness in the novel mirrors Plath's own struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts. Like Plath, Esther is a talented and ambitious young woman who faces

societal pressures and struggles with her identity and place in the world. Both Plath and Esther undergo electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) treatments, reflecting Plath's own experiences with this controversial form of therapy. In articles discussing Plath's death, analysts often draw parallels between her life, her novel *The Bell Jar*, and the character of Esther Greenwood, highlighting the autobiographical elements and exploring how Plath's personal experiences influenced her writing (Smith 78-93). Plath based Esther loosely on herself: both were raised by a widowed mother in Massachusetts; both were star writers at a women's college; both dated an imperious medical student; both suffered breakdowns, attempted suicide and recovered at an upscale mental hospital outside Boston.

At the end of *The Bell Jar*, Esther discovers her new recovery and happiness. Plath, however, never finds her second chance. At her end, she finds her only solution is to give up. Her suicide indicates her ending a miserable life. She is never able to lift her bell jar, like Esther. For Plath, her ending is not freedom and hope, rather extinguishment, a literal ending. "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice-patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (244). These are words of Esther, not Plath. For Esther, she believes in a new beginning. Even when one reaches the bottom of everything, there is still a chance to come back up, completely healed. This is the message the story of Esther Greenwood carries (Hammer 61-88).

Tragically, Plath committed suicide in 1963 in the kitchen of her London home. She was only 30 years old. Though Plath ended her battle with depression, we see Esther as a more hopeful image of herself. *The Bell Jar* ends with Esther going before a board at the psychiatric hospital for her exit interview. Always the poet, Plath leaves us with a testament to Esther's resilience as she reflects at Joanne's funeral: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (5).

Conclusion

The Victorian Era witnessed significant societal changes and shifting values. Victorian literature explored themes of madness and mental illness, particularly the impact of rigid gender roles and societal expectations on women's mental well-being. Authors critiqued the constraints and limited roles imposed on women, using literature to advocate for their rights and autonomy especially female writers such as Plath through her semi-autobiographical works like *The Bell Jar*.

Drawing from her own battles with depression and rigid gender roles, Plath crafted an authentic portrayal of a young woman's downfall into psychological turmoil amid alienation and dehumanizing expectations, reflecting the author's own tragic struggles. During this era, women were mostly confined to managing households and limited career options. However, the concept of the "New Woman" emerged, representing those who sought broader education and career opportunities, this shift influenced literature, introducing progressive female characters.

From chapter one, Feminism advocates for gender equality and social justice, addressing intersecting forms of oppression faced by women and marginalized groups. Feminist psychoanalysis represents a critical approach to understanding human psychology through the lens of gender, power dynamics, and social structures. It examines the complex interplay between gender and psyche. The feminist movement continuously evolves, with intersectionality being a key recent trend.

Intersectionality shows that gender inequality cannot be isolated from other oppressions like race and class. Black women's experiences differ due to the intersection of racism and sexism, as traditional feminist and anti-racist frameworks failed to fully capture their realities is also highlighted. Digital Feminism utilizes technology to advocate for gender equality, challenge

norms, and amplify marginalized voices, while body positivity promotes acceptance of all body types and self-love.

In the Victorian era, psychoanalysis emerged as a field to treat hysteria, a condition commonly diagnosed in women at the time. Freud's case studies on hysteria laid the groundwork for psychoanalysis. The high rates of hysteria diagnoses among women from various backgrounds during this period reflected the societal constraints and lack of autonomy women faced in the rigid Victorian culture. Hysteria was historically associated with the uterus and viewed as a uniquely female disorder, shaping perceptions of femininity and prompting examinations of the limitations and stereotypes imposed on women.

Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a searing feminist semi-autobiographical novel depicting protagonist Esther Greenwood's psychological unraveling and identity crisis amid the oppressive gender norms and stifling domesticity imposed on 1950s women. Plath's own experiences profoundly inform this candid exploration of mental illness, alienation, and women's quest for autonomy against patriarchal constraints

In Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the theme of restrictive gender roles looms large, with protagonist Esther Greenwood resisting societal pressures to conform to traditional feminine ideals of marriage, domesticity, and subservience to men.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath explores how the protagonist Esther Greenwood's relationships with both men and women profoundly influence her sense of self and understanding of her place in society. Her interactions with men like Buddy Willard highlight the pressure she faces to conform to traditional gender roles in romantic relationships, leading to feelings of disillusionment. Moreover, Plath employs powerful symbols like the titular "bell jar" to represent Esther's entrapment and isolation from the world due to her mental illness and the suffocating societal constraints imposed on women. The fig tree symbolizes her struggle to

choose a singular life path among the conflicting expectations of career, marriage, and motherhood.

Both Plath and Esther endured the loss of their fathers at a young age and navigated the pressures of societal expectations, particularly regarding gender roles and relationships. Their experiences with supportive and detrimental relationships, alongside societal pressures, culminated in feelings of anxiety, depression, and a sense of disconnection from the world around them, resonating throughout Plath's poignant prose and poetry.

Plath's tragic death echoes the struggles depicted in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, where protagonist Esther Greenwood mirrors Plath's battles with depression and suicidal thoughts. While Esther finds a glimmer of hope in her recovery.

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