

A Psychoanalytic Reading of Esther in *The Bell Jar*

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By adopting Freudian psychoanalysis, this paper attempts to verify that in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* Esther is traumatized by her father's premature death and her mother's lack of empathy, which leave her feeling abandoned, and therefore result in the core issues of fear of abandonment and fear of intimacy. Esther's whole pattern of psychological behavior, mainly manifested in her relationship with others, is grounded in her unconscious conviction that emotional ties to another human being will lead to one's being emotionally abandoned.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma

Introduction

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts, to Otto Plath, an immigrant from Germany, and Aurelia Schober Plath, an American of Australian descent. Sylvia Plath was an American poet, novelist, and short-story writer. As one of the most important representatives of confessional poets, Plath is best known for her two published collections of poetry: *The Colossus and Other Poems*, and *Ariel*. Plath's poems are intensely autobiographical, which explore her own mental anguish, her troubled marriage to poet Ted Hughes, her unresolved conflicts with her parents, and her own vision of herself. In 1982, Plath won Pulitzer Prize posthumously for *The Collected Poems*, a poetry collection which was edited by her husband Ted Hughes. She has inspired countless readers and influenced many poets since her death in 1963.

As Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, three weeks before Plath committed suicide. Critics tend to regard this novel as a semi-autobiographical one. Based on Plath's early life experiences, *The Bell Jar* tells the confusion and struggles of Esther Greenwood, a nineteen-year-old college student who descends into psychological breakdown.

In the existing criticism on *The Bell Jar*, the novel's female topic has been the focus of much critical analysis. Considering the notion of bildungsroman, Linda W. Wagner (1986) claims that *The Bell Jar* is "in structure and intent a highly conventional bildungsroman" (p. 55), but what the novel shows, as Wagner (1986) puts it, is "a woman struggling to become whole, not a woman who had reached some sense of stable self" (p. 67). Focusing on the conception of the self, Diane S. Bonds (1990) reveals the oppressive force of the separative selfhood embodied by Plath's heroine in the novel, which inflicts double bind for women: an autonomous self is proposed, but at the same time "women have their identity primarily through relationship to a man" (p. 61). In addition, *The Bell Jar*'s socio-cultural context continues to receive significant critical attention. Stephanie de Villiers (2019), for example, views the protagonist's madness in the context of 1950s America, and suggests that "the most significant and multifaceted" (p. 10) metaphor in the novel—the image of

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the bell jar—serves to indicate madness as a construction of patriarchal society used to constrain and silence women. In a similar vein, Steven Gould Axelrod (2010) maintains that the main reasons of Esther's estranging from the society and herself include Cold War tensions and the era's limits of women. Focusing especially on the economic context, Renée Dowbnia (2014) indicates that the binge-purge mechanism, produced by consumer capitalism and embodied in Esther's eating habits, controls "her values and self-perceptions" (p. 578), thereby undermining her autonomy. Some critics also take the story as a psychological case. Stephanie Tsank (2010), for instance, suggests that her father's premature death, together with Esther's perfectionist's dream ultimately "cause her to fully break down psychologically" (p. 168).

According to Sigmund Freud (1959), defenses are the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious. In other words, they are the processes by which "we keep the repressed repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel we can't handle knowing" (Tyson, 2006, p. 15). Many psychological experiences can function as defenses, for example, fear of intimacy, that is, fear of emotional involvement with another human being. It is often an effective defense against learning about our own psychological wounds because it keeps us at an emotional distance in relationships most likely to bring those wounds to the surface: relationships with lovers, parents, and friends. By not permitting ourselves to get too close to significant others, we protect ourselves from the painful past experiences that intimate relationships inevitably conjure up. If a particular defense occurs continually, then it develops into a core issue which can result from another core issue or can cause the emergence of another core issue. For example, if fear of abandonment is my core issue, I am liable to develop fear of intimacy as a core issue as well. My conviction that I will eventually be abandoned by anyone for whom I care might lead me to chronically avoid emotional intimacy in the belief that, if I don't get too close to a loved one, I won't be hurt when that loved one inevitably abandons me. Core issues stay with us throughout life and define our being in fundamental ways. Unless effectively addressed, they determine our behavior in destructive ways of which we are usually unaware.

Through a psychoanalytic lens, this paper explores the causes of Esther's depression, and attempts to demonstrate that fear of intimacy and fear of abandonment form the pattern of Esther's psychological behavior, and are responsible for her dysfunctional interpersonal relationships.

Trauma Triggered by Her Father's Death

According to Cathy Caruth (1995), one of the pioneers in developing trauma theory as it applies to literature,

although originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body, in its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. (Caruth, 1996, p. 3)

The trauma is "a confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge...and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time" (Caruth, 1995, p. 153). Esther's emotional trauma has many causes and the trigger is her father's death, which shatters her sense of security.

Esther had always been her father's favorite, but unfortunately her father died when she was only nine. Since then, Esther has often thought back to the happy time she had with her father as a child, and has an illusion that her world would never be as happy as it was after her father's death: "I thought how strange it had

never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old” (Plath, 1963, p. 55). She always fancied that

if my father hadn’t died, he would have taught me all about insects, which was his specialty at the university. He would also have taught me German and Greek and Latin, which he knew, and perhaps I would be a Lutheran. (Plath, 1963, 125)

To make things worse, Mrs. Greenwood denied Esther the chance to mourn over her father’s death.

In all the time my father had been buried in this graveyard, none of us had ever visited him. My mother hadn’t let us come to his funeral because we were only children then, and he had died in the hospital, so the graveyard and even his death had always seemed unreal to me. (Plath, 1963, p. 125)

Esther could not accept the fact that her father had died, since she had neither saw his body nor attended his funeral. She had even no outlet for her grief until she came to the graveyard herself, and found it odd that she had never been there and never cried for her father’s death which is too sudden to be real to her. When Esther finally found her father’s gravestone, she began to cry so hard that she did not know why: “I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain” (Plath, 1963, p. 127). To confront such an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic event” (Caruth, 1996, p. 57), it was expected for Esther to feel angry, depressed, and confused. It’s all part of the mourning process that could be overcome after a certain lapse of time. However, Mrs. Greenwood failed to let Esther come through the completed process of mourning and thus adjust to the subsequent life. She had not even explained what death means to Esther, but instead

had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn’t have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen. (Plath, 1963, p. 127)

Being deprived of the opportunity to mourn for her own loss and simultaneously to find a proper way to get through it, Esther was traumatized by her father’s premature death. The trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having witnessed without comprehending it.

As a nine-year-old child who could not understand death, Esther’s immediate impression of it was of being abandoned. Esther’s lack of direct mourning experience led to “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth, 1996, p. 61), which becomes the basis of trauma in her psyche.

Trauma Intensified by Her Mother’s Indifference

If her father’s premature death made Esther feel physically abandoned, then her mother’s lack of attention intensified Esther’s trauma by making her feel emotionally abandoned.

After her father’s death, Mrs. Greenwood taught shorthand and typing to support the family. She scrimped to cultivate Esther and let her participate in “the Girl Scouts and the piano lessons and the water-color lessons and the dancing lessons and the sailing camp” (Plath, 1963, p. 56), totally unconcerned about Esther’s interest and ambitions. Although she herself hated the job of shorthand, she nagged Esther to learn shorthand in order to get a decent job in the future: “she was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I’d have a practical skill as well as a college degree. ‘Even the apostles were tentmakers,’ she’d say. ‘They had to live, just the way we do.’” (Plath, 1963, p. 31). Mrs. Greenwood seems to have never appreciated Esther’s literary aspirations, just blindly imposed her own expectations on her.

On the surface, Esther's mother had invested a lot of money and effort in her, but actually she provided no emotional support for Esther. Somewhat disheartened when coming back from New York, the only thing Esther still held out hope for was the summer writing course, and she was sure that she would be accepted. However, the news of her rejection from the writing course was announced directly by her mother without any care given to her mental state. The refusal was a huge blow to Esther's sense of self-worth, and her mother's lack of care contributed to her feeling of being abandoned.

All through June the writing course stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap. (Plath, 1963, p. 86)

After that she "had nothing to look forward to" (Plath, 1963, p. 88). Instead of caring about Esther's psychological state, Mrs. Greenwood convinced her daughter to study shorthand. At first Esther felt hopeful and tried to engage with it. However, she could not resist rejecting it: "there wasn't one job I felt like doing where you used shorthand. And, as I sat there and watched, the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness" (Plath, 1963, p. 92). She got annoyed by the shorthand and transferred her anger to her mother's snore:

my mother turned from a foggy log into a slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and a snore raveling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands. (Plath, 1963, p. 93)

Such an instant of death wish for her mother also suggests Esther's emotional isolation.

Being dictatorial yet knowing nothing, Mrs. Greenwood treated Esther with indifference because she clearly did not hear what Esther told her, nor did she respond to Esther's needs in any meaningful way. When Esther suffered an increasingly severe insomnia, and had not slept for seven nights, her mother did not believe it was possible and sent her to Doctor Gordon, a psychiatrist who gave her electric shock treatments. She did not pay enough attention to Esther's psychological crisis, viewing her nervous breakdown as a moral failing, not a serious illness. When Esther refused to see Doctor Gordon, she gladly said that "I knew my baby wasn't like...those awful people at that hospital...I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (Plath, 1963, p. 110). Claiming all knowledge that pertains to her daughter's illness that her improving is only a matter of will, Mrs. Greenwood noted at the start of her daughter's depression: "my mother said the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you" (Plath, 1963, p. 123). When Esther considered converting to Catholicism to stop her suicide attempts, Mrs. Greenwood was totally unaware of her mental condition and even mocked her for having no sense: "do you think they'll take somebody like you, right off the bat? Why you've got to know all these catechisms and credos and believe in them, lock, stock and barrel. A girl with your sense" (Plath, 1963, p. 125). Mrs. Greenwood brought Esther a dozen of red roses on her birthday when she was in asylum, and Esther has thrown them in the wastebasket. She confessed to Dr. Nolan that she hated her mother. After months of being kept away from Esther, her mother's solution was to pretend that the half year has been a bad dream: "We'll take up where we left off, Esther," she had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile. We'll act as if all this were a bad dream" (Plath, 1963, p. 180), without knowing that for Esther "the world itself is the bad dream" (Plath, 1963, p. 180).

Esther's poignant statement of who she is, what she has become, did not reach her mother's ears. She understood little about her daughter from the beginning to the end of the narrative. The loss of emotional connection and support aggravated Esther's mental crisis and made her feel completely abandoned. When

asked by a sailor on the Boston Common if she got no mom and dad, Esther replied yes, with hot tears tracking down her cheek. Deep down in her heart, Esther felt she was abandoned not only physically by her father but also emotionally by her mother.

Such an emotional trauma is bound to “provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure” (Freud, 1959, p. 23). For Esther, fear of abandonment functioned initially as a defense, and developed into a core issue as it occurs frequently. The unshakable belief that her loved ones are going to desert her—physical abandonment, or do not really care about her—emotional abandonment results in the emergence of another core issue, that is, fear of intimacy. These core issues define Esther’s being fundamentally, and determine her destructively psychological behavior of which she is probably unaware.

Dysfunctional Relationships With Others

Esther’s fear of intimacy is pervasive throughout the novel, especially manifested in her romantic and sexual relationships. Although on the surface it was Buddy Willard’s infidelity that ruined their relationship, it was actually predetermined by Esther’s core issue. During her college years Esther was ostracized by her female schoolmates, but things oddly changed in the house after she received Buddy’s invitation letter to the Yale Junior Prom:

the seniors on my floor started speaking to me and every now and then one of them would answer the phone quite spontaneously and nobody made any more nasty loud remarks outside my door about people wasting their golden college days with their noses stuck in a book. (Plath, 1963, p. 46)

Esther found herself the envy of her housemates in a way that her academic success had never achieved, and that filled her with immense gratification. She wanted Buddy to fall in love with her just because it meant she “wouldn’t have to worry about what [she] was doing on any more Saturday nights the rest of the year” (Plath, 1963, p. 46), and thus changed her housemates’ attitude. When Buddy promised her to see her every third weekend, Esther “was almost fainting and dying to get back to college and tell everybody” (Plath, 1963, p. 47). Nevertheless, Esther adored Buddy only when there was distance maintained between them, as she admitted: “I’d adored him from a distance for five years before he even looked at me, and then there was a beautiful time when I still adored him and he started looking at me” (Plath, 1963, p. 41). When Buddy wanted to take their relationship further and showed her his naked body, Esther felt very depressed and decided to ditch him for once and for all. Learning of the news that Buddy had caught tuberculosis, Esther did not feel one bit sorry but only a wonderful relief. She thought “how convenient it would be now I didn’t have to announce to everybody at college I had broken off with Buddy and start the boring business of blind dates all over again” (Plath, 1963, p. 55). Esther’s pattern of psychological behavior reveals her desire for ego gratification rather than for emotional intimacy.

Esther compared herself with the nun in her favorite story about a fig tree, which showed an extreme fear of intimacy.

This fig grew on a green lawn between the house of a Jewish man and a convent, and the Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun kept meeting at the tree to pick the ripe figs, until one day they saw an egg hatching in a bird’s nest on a branch of the tree, and as they watched the little bird peck its way out of the egg, they touched the backs of their hands together, and then the nun didn’t come out to pick figs with the Jewish man any more. (Plath, 1963, p. 42)

Esther thought it was a lovely story and “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” (Plath, 1963, p. 42). She wanted to enter the story world in which there would be no emotional investment.

When Constantin, a simultaneous interpreter introduced by Mrs. Willard, called her to go out, Esther built up “a glamorous picture of a man who would love [her] passionately the minute he met [her]” (Plath, 1963, p. 40) but secretly hoped he “would be short and ugly and I would come to look down on him in the end the way I looked down on Buddy Willard” (Plath, 1963, p. 40). This thought gave her a certain satisfaction as it built a stage on which she could reenact, in disguised form, the original wounding experience and change the result. However, due to the low self-esteem produced by her psychological trauma, the unconscious premise operating here—I would not have these wounds if I were a good person—remains repressed, its illogic remains unchallenged, and Esther remained in its grasp.

In psychoanalytic terms, if a woman fears intimacy, nothing can make her feel safer than a man who has no desire for it. This would explain why she copulated with Irwin upon knowing that he had “lots and lots of affairs in Cambridge” (Plath, 1963, p. 172). Esther “wanted somebody [she] didn’t know and wouldn’t go on knowing” (Plath, 1963, p. 173), because he posed no threat to her protective shell; he would not have wanted to break through it even if he could have. And it is very unlikely that Esther was even aware of her psychological motives.

Esther’s fear of intimacy is also apparent in her relationships with her friends. She identified with Betsy to a certain point, but mocked her with Doreen that “Betsy was always asking me to do things with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way” (Plath, 1963, p. 10). When Jay Cee took her to lunch with other *Ladies’ Day* staff members, Esther said to Betsy, “I missed Doreen. She would have murmured some fine, scalding remark about Hilda’s miraculous furpiece to cheer me up” (Plath, 1963, p. 25), but deep down, she felt morally superior to Doreen. The most decisive act Esther took toward Doreen was leaving her, drunk and sick, to sleep in the hallway after Doreen collapsed at her door. Although admiring her boss Jay Cee, the experienced, successful magazine editor, Esther in private called her “weird old women” (Plath, 1963, p. 167) and even got annoyed by her: “Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn’t think they had anything to teach me” (Plath, 1963, p. 10). The way Esther behaves in regard to these people is indicative of her unconscious desire to be emotionally insulated. Esther’s ambivalent attitude that yearned for intimacy but always found reasons for disliking nearly everyone reflects her fear of intimacy.

In fact, fear of intimacy with others is usually a product of fear of intimacy with oneself. Because close interpersonal relationships dredge up the psychological residue of early trauma and bring into play aspects of her identity she does not want to deal with or even know about, the best way to avoid painful psychological self-awareness is to avoid close interpersonal relationships and maintain emotional aloofness.

The lack of intimacy resulted in Esther’s feeling lonely, unloved and emotionally deprived. As she got more and more depressed, Esther became increasingly aloof from her body, which could be illustrated through images and thoughts of death repeatedly possessing her. She constantly imagined the scenes of disembowelment, opening one’s veins in a warm bath, and being electrocuted. The repetition of the images of death is “threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration” (Caruth, 1996, p. 63). Esther’s death drive was so intense that she took actions, such as trying to hang herself with the silk cord of her mother’s bathrobe, and taking a massive overdose of sleeping pills. She was stuck in a process

in which “the depressed and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object” (LaCapra, 2014, p. 66). Her suicidal behavior functions as a psychological defense—by taking the initiative to abandon the world, one can avoid being abandoned eventually by others—and as such, it underscores the psychological importance of her traumatic experience: if her early trauma were not a powerful force in her life then she would not have to defend against it.

Conclusion

Esther’s psychological trauma which is triggered by her father’s premature death and worsened by her mother’s neglect and lack of understanding, the conviction that she is abandoned both physically and emotionally, results in her core issues like fear of abandonment and fear of intimacy, which prevent Esther from establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships and lead to her depression.

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