

Perhaps the most distinctive thing about Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* is its ability to make the reader feel as if at some stage in their own lives, they had felt the same things that the main protagonist, Esther Greenwood feels. Her insights into the mind are in fact, alarming, and make a reader question why exactly that is, given that the protagonist is a nineteen year old, 1950's female and that, society has apparently 'changed' so much with the 'advent' of feminism. But how far reaching is Plath's message? What did she set out to accomplish with this early foray into the world of feminism? In her novel, images from the mass media paint a very real picture of American cultural influence and track Esther's search for an inner identity or a 'true self' amidst it all. From Esther's point of view of self-discovery – of her place in the world and of her spiral down into depression as a form of rebellion – comes the realization that her own prospect of 'ideal self' doesn't fit anywhere within what society expects or in fact, has culturally ingrained through patriarchy. Plath's analogy of Esther feeling trapped in a "bell jar", as a symptom of her isolation and depression, is before her time not only in the medical field, but also culturally and socially.

Gayle Rubin asks: "What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man, than gold in itself is money..." (1998, p.534). When reading *The Bell Jar*, then, perhaps it is necessary to ask what are these relationships and circumstances by which a female such as Esther, in 1950's American society, becomes an oppressed woman? What are her systems of relationships that she, as a woman, becomes the quarry of as Rubin calls it: 'the systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products' (p.534). *The Bell Jar* becomes a feminist look into how 1950's America and its burgeoning media influenced the lives of its people to the point of masking the individual and, in this case, constructing a female identity through encouraging an adherence to cultural 'norms' in patriarchal relations. Esther's tortured self stems from this pressure to conform, and the wish to be something she knows is culturally impossible – and so she begins to turn her conflict inward, tearing herself away from outside relations. Her non-conformity in this patriarchal society labels her and perhaps other women like her as 'insane'. The struggle between what is 'real' and what is 'constructed' to be 'real' for Esther begins with her troubled relations as an individual to the community around her and what it expects of her as a woman; that is, the expectation that Esther, like a commodity, will be shaped into a 'domesticated product.'

Contemporary feminist theory suggests that the notion of a 'separative self' – that is, a constrained yet individual ego, and the cultural forces that oppress women – work together. Bonds (1990) claims that the *The Bell Jar* illustrates this by proposing an 'ideal' of self, uncontaminated by others, through its representation not only of Esther's descent into depression, but also of her recovery (p.50). She goes on to state that such a conception of a 'separative self' denies the fact that a concept of 'self' is all relative to surroundings, leaving Esther to define her 'self' in relation to the culturally ingrained stereotypes of women (p.50), which are constantly referred to in the novel. Esther's apparent hope for a career as a 'serious' writer and poet is still inhibited by the fact that she is writing for a 'fashion' magazine, fashion being prescribed in the patriarchal cultural domain to the feminine, thus indicating that the 'intelligent' woman's place in society is still in this sphere of the feminine and not taken seriously in the 'productive' sphere. The magazine defines a form of media that culturally prescribes the very patriarchy that influences and images 'normal' American culture, and 'normal' feminine culture. References to various types of media, such as magazines and their relationships to a productive culture for women, permeate Esther's thoughts. Magazines like *Baby Talk* in the waiting room of a doctor's office, *Time* and *Life* in Buddy Willard's room, as well as the article her mother sent her from *Readers Digest*, 'In Defense of Chastity', are placed in the novel, and after each reference Esther sees images that float up around her, influencing her thoughts: 'The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank like the face of a foetus in a bottle' (p.234). This imagery is telling in that the 'foetus' is trapped and 'blank,' like Esther, who is also trapped in a bell jar unable to escape cultural influence and define a 'true' self. It is perhaps the last reference to a magazine that is most telling,

where Esther is apparently 'cured' in society's terms. She leaves 'blindly' through an issue of *National Geographic* (p.256) not 'seeing' anymore that she is still in fact trapped. Esther's 'cure', according to the culturally dominant society, is not being able to identify a 'self' amidst media images of women, who, allow themselves to be fashioned (excuse the pun) into a social product of society, used by men for various domestic and sexual purposes.

Esther's actual response to what is happening around her contrasts with the outer responses that are attributed to her. Smith (1991) claims that the whole reality of *The Bell Jar* is a world 'mediated through graven images, through photographs, movie films, magazines and newspapers' (p.97). The novel is constantly depicting images of American 'normality' manufactured by the media. Esther's account of the film in which she begins to feel the effects of food poisoning after the *Ladies Day* lunch suggests that the film itself is a form of poisoning. Watching the film, Esther comments that it starred:

a nice blonde girl who looked like June Allyson but was really somebody else, and a sexy black haired girl who looked like Elizabeth Taylor but who was really somebody else, and two, big, broad shouldered bone-heads with names like Rick and Gil. (p.44)

Here we see Esther's acknowledgement of constructed images and her reaction to them played out by her reaction to the film, the 'poison' causing her and the other girls to vomit. Smith notes that the girls in the film, like the girls in the novel, perform the customary procedures expected of heroines in a football romance – there is no such thing as a clear reflection of reality only the 'reproduction of already ideologically structured narratives and characters, reinforcing a simple cultural message that marriage equates to fulfillment. Nice girls get married, and sexy girls end up lonely and abandoned' (1991, p.99). Bonds suggest that this demonstrates Esther's struggle with the fact that her sense of identity, as a woman, is dependent on finding 'the right man' and engaging in the 'sexual hunt' (1990, p.56). Bonds goes further to say that Esther feels cut off from a culture that expects her participation in this hunt, and her continuing alienation is shown through images of dismemberment in the novel (1996, p.50). Esther constantly sees 'cadaverous heads' and disembodied and disfigured faces, as well as the floating heads of Buddy Willard and Joan Gillings. Her failure to recognize herself in mirrors, such as seeing 'a big smudgy Chinese woman' (p.19) and in hospital when she looks in the mirror thinking it is a picture, describing 'bristly chicken feather tufts all over their head bulging out in a shapeless way' (p.183), is also a sign that Esther is experiencing alienation and fear of a loss of self. Gilbert and Gubar (1998) claim that 'self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I am" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is'. They go further and state that the woman writer acknowledges with 'pain, confusion and anger that what she sees in the mirror is usually a male construct' (p. 597).

Esther's rage at her position in society, and the expectations that she will 'flatten out like Mrs Willard's kitchen matt' (p.89) under a man's feet, turn inward because of the dominant force of the society that Esther lives in. She realizes that it is not just men who are oppressing her but also other women who follow the patriarchy as well and engage in the already established 'norm' of viewing women as commodities in relationships that serve men. For example, Mrs Willard states: "What a man wants is a mate, and what a woman wants is infinite security" (p75). Esther makes this connection about other women when she states:

I began to think maybe it was true that when you got married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards, you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (p.90).

Audre Lorde states that 'we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate' (p.631). This is precisely what Esther is doing – she sees the differences between herself and the image the dominant force of patriarchy construct about women and chooses not to copy it, she can't ignore it, so she sets out to destroy it by detachment of her 'self' from this world. She is constantly

bombarded with mass media images, telling her what she should be like, and she feels like she is trapped – doomed to marriage and servitude, or career bound and unhappy. Esther's dismemberment of herself is symptomatic of this society. She has to self-destruct in this manner (depression, attempted suicide) because, as Smith argues, 'conformist society' allows no place for a non-norm referenced self, and requires the removal of an individual self. She feels that the only way she can protest is by self-destructing and revolting against the anonymity of mass society, to discover an 'authentic' self away from the images portrayed to her in media (1991, p.95). Unless she does this, the 'real' self remains 'unrealised', existing only as a socially given identity of 'parts' of American culture - like in an 'American football romance'. In fact, Esther's inner response to having a 'self' only comes up when she is near death, removed from the influence of others: first, when she tries to drown her self she affirms repeatedly "I am I am I am" (p.166), and later at Joan's funeral when she is apparently 'cured': "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (p.256). Here again, then, we see how vastly different Esther's outer response is to her inner one, and how Esther seems 'cured' outwardly, but inwardly is still confused and looking for an authentic 'self'. She is feeling no different to how she felt before, but has conditioned or been conditioned for her outer response to not reflect her inner one, and instead has it reflect the constructed 'norm' that is dictated to her by society through its images and role models for women.

Esther begins her detachment from the world and from relationships that influence her, like that of Mrs Willard, her mother, and all the other women, as Esther puts it, who 'thought they had something to teach me' and 'for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them' (p.180). Esther's inner conflict and inability to resolve her issues of self-identity take the form of a psychological breakdown and a suicide attempt. However, this ultimately leads to Esther being a newsworthy item, again blurring the line for her between a 'real' image and a constructed one. This time Esther actually becomes the media image again not recognizing herself, and again, distorted:

The first clipping showed a big blown up picture of a girl with black shadowed eyes and black lips spread in a grin. I couldn't imagine where such a tarty picture had been taken until I noticed a Bloomingdale necklace glinting out of it with bright, white highlights, like imitation stars' (p.209).

Abigail Cheever (2000) describes depression as 'simultaneously an illness and an identity; it is at once a disease, foreign to the individual and invasive of the self, and a way of life both essential and constitutive to one's being' (p.347). So how does this apply to Plath's writing? Is depression something to live through and write about? By dismissing and masking her symptoms at the end of the novel, does Esther dismiss her true 'self'? Esther's depression is an illness of identity, to find herself, she must also destroy parts of her being which she feels are foreign and not real. By destroying these parts of herself, in the eyes of culture, she becomes a 'madwoman'. Cheever argues that depression is an illness that interferes with the capacity of the self to be itself, and hence one must correct this condition to enable selfhood: 'By extension then, a "former depressive's" behavior and character should not be able to cause a recurrence. Eternal vigilance does not guarantee freedom from relapse.' (p.348). She goes further to ask: "What is the content of depression in remission, in the absence of actual depressive symptoms?" (p.349). Esther is apparently cured, showing no symptoms on the outside, but many signs point to the fact that she is 'outwardly cured' by society's terms yet still conflicted 'inwardly' without acknowledging it. Although the ending of *The Bell Jar* is left for the reader to wonder, Wagner, (1986) argues that Esther's recovery is 'positive' (p.64) in that she is reborn. However, Bonds (p.54) and others refute this by saying that critics such as Wagner, who see the ending in a positive light, ignore the imagery used by Plath of Esther feeling like a 'retreaded tyre' that has been patched, that may be fine one moment, but has the ability 'go flat' again. The phrase 'flatten out' funnily enough, sounds like her earlier reference to the kitchen matt of Mrs Willard, exactly what Esther believes marriage will do to her – 'flatten' her out under the feet of a man. The second birth of Esther and the tyre image thus leaves us to associate Esther's new look at life with the role expectations that contributed to her breakdown in the first place. This negative image of

Esther seemingly preparing for marriage when going to meet the board that will decide if she is cured: 'straightening her seams' and 'something old, something new' (p.257) – but not getting married and, instead, being 'retreaded,' equates perhaps to one and the same thing. Thus we see that Esther is 'fit' in society's terms once again, no longer 'insane' and perhaps more willing to conform, but in a different way than before. She is 'cured' of her illness for the time being, but the reader is left unsure if later in her life, Esther will realize her position in the patriarchy once again, and slip. Bonds claims that Esther's recovery merely 'extends the separations from, or rejections of others which seem to have played an important part in bringing about her breakdown. (p.57). Esther is now ready to go back into the world, but this time she is armed with a diaphragm, and a red dress – and little else has changed.

Esther feels stifled by her place in the world, always looking for where it is she is meant to be. A lot of Esther's main tortures stem from the identity that is placed on her simply because she is a woman. Her identity, it seems, is defined by the position of women in this society, an identity that Esther hates yet an identity that Esther seems powerless to change. Her options in this tale seem to be a home, husband and family, OR a career, and to have one means sacrificing the other. This is one of Esther's many struggles – she is not 'supposed' to want both, and culture has ingrained that it is one or the other. Even more so, she's supposed to know exactly what it is she wants, but what she wants doesn't seem to gel anywhere within this picture. Hence, Esther does not have a concept of self, only an image portrayed by the media, and a construct of what society deems the role a woman should have in her relations to this society as a commodity of the patriarchy. In her destruction of herself, she tries to destroy parts of American culture ingrained in her by the community. Esther seemingly has everything – beauty, brains, a college scholarship at a prestigious university, a handsome boyfriend studying to be a doctor – what any young girl circa 1950's America 'should' want for herself, and also, what any glitzy magazine tells her she should want. Plath gives feminism a voice, but does not offer any solution to Esther's or society's problems. Her skill, however, lies in her ability to make the reader feel Esther's plight, and as well as this find a piece of themselves somewhere amongst it as well. The novel, then, is a culturally fragmented look into an America whose 'real' people conflict with the images its media portrays as 'ideal'. Could these be individuals like ourselves? 'Individuals' who have yet to discover a concept of 'self', and more scarily so, have not discovered, but have not even thought to question if one exists? Perhaps this question, then, is the very alarming reason why we can so empathize with Esther in a world gone 'mad' with global media.

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