

Plath Profiles

Essays

The Female Helix of Paradox and Identity Within the Mirrored Imagery of *The Bell Jar*

by Dolores Batten

What is a bell jar?

In its most scientific sense,

it is a simple container

used to separate one entity from another.

For Sylvia Plath, however, the bell jar is more than that—

it is an iconic symbol of both suppression and freedom. Inherent in its depth and complexity is an essential image as well as a spiraling allegory. Recurring through numerous pages of *The Bell Jar*, along with the presence of image within the title itself, the bell jar is a symbol used repetitiously in the confessional novel's semi-autobiographical account of Sylvia Plath's life—a story replete with both positive and negative connotations related to a singular image—that of the bell jar. Within the text, Plath shows a duality between symbolic polarities, reflecting the bell jar as it appears from the perspective of a woman growing up in the mid-twentieth century. Navigating between her coming of age both within and without the primary 'bell jar' of society, Plath's protagonist Esther thwarts an impending mental illness that will place her under a second bell jar—one that removes mental clarity and replaces it instead with an emerging sense of desperation and chronic melancholia.

According to the Oxford English living dictionary, a bell jar can be seen as both “a bell-shaped glass cover used for covering delicate objects or used in a laboratory, typically for enclosing samples” and “an environment in which someone is protected or cut off from the outside world”. In this multi-faceted definition, the bell jar can be seen as a symbolic image of both life and death, simultaneously. This is the paradox innate in Plath’s work. If the bell jar is to be seen as a symbol representing life, then in its metaphorically protective shroud, the image signifies a shield against the negative forces and elements of society; but, if it is to be seen as an image of death, it is more than what it once appeared— instantaneously, it becomes the opposite of what it was once engendered to be, destroying the very thing that it serves to protect. The bell jar, then, is a label placed over the spaces of enclosure. What decides its meaning lies in how the enclosure is used by the person who is placed underneath it.

In the first few chapters of *The Bell Jar*, the novel’s protagonist, Esther Greenwood, visits a teaching hospital with her pseudo-boyfriend Buddy Willard, the Yale medical student. While there, she speaks of being taken “into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born” (63). The bell jars containing the dead fetuses

represent two juxtaposing image—that of both life and death. The intentional symbolism of entrapped life and its subsequent death then adds to the understanding of the bell jar as a paradoxical and mirrored images— relating with it the experience that a woman goes through in both the birth of herself and her children, as well as in the subsequent death that occurs for both as a result of the interactions that they must carry on while constrained in a patriarchal-driven society.

Therefore, the bell jar is a powerful symbol of enclosure that expresses both the strength and the frailty of the feminine; showing at once that the women’s experience of the world can be both liberating and entrapping as a result of male influence. Through creating such duplicity in a singular object, Sylvia Plath invites her readers to view a young woman’s life in the bell jar, as it occurs under the metaphorical microscope—yet another scientific image—which magnifies Esther Greenwood’s battles with depression, female subservience, and suicidal tendencies, thus bringing awareness to the concerns and anxieties of the 1950s woman. In “Sylvia Plath’s Bell Jar as a Psychological Space”, Mahrukh Baig discusses the psychological impact that male dominance had on women of this time period as a direct result of the male double-standard which was inherent in 1950s society:

The female's sense of enclosure in a psychological 'Bell Jar'...female degradation through male dominance and double sexual standards in 1950ss American Society...reflected in the image of the Bell Jar resulting in (Plath's) feminist revolt for the attainment of freedom. (This) social entrapment led to the physical confinement causing a psychological space that resulted in a thirst for liberty. (abstract, para 1)

This desire for both mental and physical freedom existed in a helix of interwoven ideas for women—strong concepts of feminism between that of a woman's experience in society and that of her knowledge of self that could not be untangled from their patriarchal influences. The helix is thus formed in strands within the images of a woman's mind, body, and soul would then form a perfect line to express the woman's experience if it could only be separated from the predominant male ideologies of the time that complicate the demarcation and linearity of the image being represented.

Baig describes the bell jar as three distinct jars. "Each of the three jars involved different thematic concerns by building up a vacuum in a woman's life. The image of the 'Bell Jar' could be taken at three allegorical levels: (1) The

1950ss America; (2) the vacuum between self and society, and (3) the space between body and soul" (2). The image of 1950ss America as a bell jar signifies the silencing of the woman's voice, in both her choices of vocation and her own ideas. The second vacuum between self and society encloses the woman in a world that is still male-dominant, and provides no room for the expansion of feminine ideas. Finally, the space between the body and soul can be rendered as experience of the first two bell jars, and the resulting and damaging effects that society created for women, as the third. This creates a Russian nesting-doll effect on Esther's life, as she attempts to move through a seemingly endless myriad of bell jars. During Esther's initial stay at a mental institution, she had experienced all three at once as she recovered from a severely traumatic electroshock treatment:

There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. (143)

A paradox extends, then, to what becomes inherently known by the

reader in Plath's intentional lack of distinction between what is real for Esther and what is perceived—thus illuminating the female experience of identity. This is expressed through the use of a secondary image—the glass mirror. Speaking of herself in the third person as a spectator of her own life, Esther recoils this helix in a failed attempt at suicide, in which she states that “the person in the mirror was paralyzed and too stupid to do a thing” (148). Plath's use of the mirrored image also extends to Esther's friend Hilda's recognition of the self in a storefront window, in which she questions being alive and real: “(s)he stared at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist” (100). In another instance, Esther even sees herself as distorted in this same mirror image: “The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury” (19). This repetitious feeling of being removed from one's own life also reflects the crisis of identity occurring for the 1950s woman who is internally alienated from the archetype of her own perceived subservient existence in male society.

Esther's use of the glass mirror signifies an initial object in its construct as being both reflective and temporal by its mirrored referent, while expressing the image of the glass bell jar as both clear

and transparent. This conflicting juxtaposition between these two main images shows the lack of clarity in what is tangible and intangible in Esther's outer world, adding to the understanding of the metaphorical glass bell jar as a complexity that exists both within and without the inner world between body and mind. Baig speaks of the multiplicity of the psychological bell jar as both a benefit and a detriment to Esther's own wellbeing and survival:

To deliberately live in a state of alienation and detachment in order to ensure her a sense of security, Esther has formed the bell jar around her. However, simultaneously, she feels being reduced to an object from a human being that makes her all the more isolated and dejected. (11)

This alienation can be seen early on in the novel in Esther's experience of her life as the center of a black hole: “I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot...a hole in the ground...getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier rushing away from all those lights and excitement at about a million miles an hour” (16). Esther is mentally reverting into the bell jar from the very first few pages, and yet is attempting to continue her existence outside of it by being a part of the woman's group of

magazine writers on scholarship in New York.

Esther's bell jar also changes throughout the novel. At one point, she shows her appreciation for the potential lack of the bell jar's transparency when she is in an institutional room which continues to act as a bell jar—one that makes her finally feel secure. "At first I wondered why the room felt so safe. Then I realized it was because there were no windows." (134). Even though the bell jar exists psychologically as a transparent prison, it can also be seen in this part of the novel as an opaque sanctuary. This is the paradox in the bell jar's transmutable qualities. Esther desires an enclosure without being seen; one that is set apart from the traditional bell jar image. By being enclosed where no one can see her, and also where she does not see anyone else, Esther is finally free to be introspective, and, in this surreal image, free from the conventions of civilization.

Society not only creates but encourages these types of bell jars. From a circle of friends gathered into an unsheltered world during outings and excursions, to a building enclosure that protects one from the outside elements, metaphorical bell jars are a part of daily life. All of these enclosures are thus created to act as a protective barrier from the more nefarious elements of the societal view—those which are both within and without an individual's

control. More so, even in venturing outside of the bell jar in society, one must be cautious, arming themselves with defensive mechanisms of both mental and physical protection. The bell jar, then, also presents itself as a microcosm—a physical separation which situates itself allegorically as that enclosure in which a woman wishes to exist in order to avoid the dangers inherent in a world-scape that contains male-dominant, and thus conflicting, ideologies from that of her own.

For a woman, the imagery of the see-through bell jar is vital. In its innate transparency, it acts as both a shield and a shelter which serves to counteract the dangers created in a patriarchal-driven society—the very male traditions which still see women as sexual objects rather than intellectual entities. This was not lost on Plath. Within *The Bell Jar*, she speaks uncandidly of the double standard that exists for men and women in the 1950s through the example of Buddy and Esther's relationship. When Esther finds out that Buddy is sexually experienced with women and yet represents himself as being "pure", she makes this statement: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (81). Esther is aware that this double-standard exists in society and challenges it by speaking about it to numerous individuals.

Esther also interjects regular comments about Buddy throughout *The Bell Jar*. By using symbols such as dead fetuses and cadavers in sentences which are associated with him, she is drawing on the images of death that occur in motherhood. Similarly, she is also commenting on the soul death that she might experience in marriage and childbirth. In "Critical Essays of Sylvia Plath", Linda Wagner-Martin asserts that "these images are all connected with women's traditional choices in life - to become mothers - (this) begins to frame the essential conflict between Buddy and Esther" (58). Not only does Esther question whether she can be married to any man, she especially questions whether she can see herself having children with a potential husband who has lived a promiscuous life of double standards; Buddy is allowed to be a playboy before he marries, while Esther is expected to remain virginal. As a female of the 1950s, Esther is also expected to remain under this psychological bell jar; destined to become the submissive wife to Buddy and abandon all identity of self in the process. This is yet another bell jar which stifles the spirit of the female and takes away her most sacred right—that of the use of her own body.

This expectation of female submissiveness also extends to the way in which women carry on life in the social sphere. With choices such as

work and childbirth being made by male figures, women in the 1950s were resigned to a life that was chosen for them, much in the way that Buddy Willard's mother had already decided that Esther would marry him. According to Baig, this suppression led to the stunting of a young woman's emotional and psychological growth:

The Bell Jar struggles to define a sensitive girl in a world that denies the development of the female self. It is a bitter critique of the 1950s American Society that has rules, regulations, double standards and emotional as well as physical constraints on the female. Plath pictures the devastating effects of such elements experienced by women who are slowly driven insane by the gender stereotypic confines of their social world. (8)

Alongside the experience of outer society lies the additional bell jar of inner relationships. This includes the experience of a woman's sexuality. In "Images of Madness and Retrieval: An Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*", Susan Coyle posits that "Esther's sexual experiences are (also) somewhat dislocating: she cannot define herself as a sexual being. The patterns that she sees in marriage and motherhood make her loathe more than desire either of

these accepted institutions" (161-162). This constant pressure from male society leads to Esther's identity crisis—a key component in her romance with suicide.

In the 1950s, a woman was expected to be both a mother and a wife—making choices of both chastity as a maiden and morality as a mother; an assumed archetype which would translate to the empirical image of womanhood. This would later be challenged through the ongoing efforts of feminists. Even though the outward discourse of feminism had begun to take its place within academic and literary discourse, women in the twentieth century were still placed under bell jars in work, sexuality, relationships, and societal beliefs, as well as through the over-sexualized imagery of media and fashion. This is the female paradox—that women exist in a helix of intertwined realities, in which two juxtaposing ideas between genders push against one another in opposition—both the desire of a woman to be outside of the confinement of the bell jar, and the necessity for the bell jar's continuance in preserving and protecting that which is feminine from both masculine influence and societal exploitation. The bell jar, then, also acts as a sterilized space, removing the fear of contamination, of penetration—of danger befalling the woman in the bubble. But in this same breath, the

bell jar is also motionless. It is stagnant and provides no room for movement. Thus, the bell jar as an image acts as a preserving and protective element as well as one of entrapment and constraint—the paradox lies in the fact that Esther needs an enclosure not only to protect her from society, but also from herself.

The paradox of woman's experience with identity expands endlessly in the stale air of the bell jar. In "Divided Woman and Generic Doubleness in the Bell Jar", Gayle Whittier also writes that "Esther Greenwood's primary identity is that of any intellectual woman; according to the society standards present during Esther's time, an 'intellectual woman' was herself a cultural contradiction in terms, a disharmonious combination of biology and intelligence. It is in part from this sense of her-self as a living paradox that Esther grows increasingly depressed" (134). Coyle also looks at this depression and subsequent identity crisis as a manifestation of a woman's lack of control over her own sexuality:

Sexually, Esther cannot find her place in the world. Her sexual metaphors are vivid, sometimes hilarious, and sometimes touched with pathos. When Buddy Willard, the ostensible object of her desire, undresses in front of her in a passionless sort of show-and-tell, she looks at his

genitals and thinks of 'turkey neck and turkey gizzards' (55). Understandably, she is very depressed. (166)

The imagery of the bell jar also goes hand in hand with Esther's repeated encounters involving the unwanted advances of men. Esther's response regarding reciprocation in undressing in front of Buddy uncovers feelings of feminine vulnerability. For Esther, this type of display would be "tantamount to having her college Posture Picture taken in the nude" (64). In demonstrating the lack of emotion behind Buddy's exposure, Esther is also clearly acknowledging that Buddy is not the right fit for her as a partner. Her lack of clarity on what makes a suitable partner becomes even more muddled in the attempted rape that she endures at the hands of Marco:

He is described in a remarkable combination of images: animal, god, and machine. His smile reminds Esther of a snake striking. Like a savage animal, he later tears her dress with his teeth. She concludes "women-haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock-full of power. (Coyle 88)

Even though the bell jar has already ascended on Esther, Plath does not choose to name the bell jar directly until many chapters after. Rather, she

continues to show the effects of a bell jar that can be felt throughout the text while only mentioning the bell jar by name a total of five times. This adds to the reader's experience of Esther's disorientation. As Esther continues to recognize the lack of control that she, as a woman, has over her life, the bell jar continues to press down on her—it can be felt much earlier than it can be seen. As a result, throughout the course of the novel, her writing becomes increasingly fragmented and disassociated as a result of a worsening mental illness that is making it harder and harder for her to breathe. Miraculously, all of these concerns with the woman would fade instantaneously if Esther would just accept the prospect of marriage. This is where Esther Greenwood finds herself stuck, as she attempts to have control over the facets of her own defined bell jar, all while being inundated with the male agenda. Esther recognizes herself as being in the aforementioned bell jars; she is happiest when she is not seen, because she does not feel that the world views her, or women in general, in the proper light. According to Bill Gilson, "the bell jar is entrapment, and a way of placing one on a display of sorts, behind glass. It rises at one point in *The Bell Jar* but it hangs above, even still. It's a relief to the mad person, separating the air she breathes from the air of the sane" (*The Walking Man Presents: Sylvia Plath Biographies*, 8). Here lies another paradox inherent in the bell jar's

meaning—by placing herself in the bell jar, to be examined, to be seen, and yet not manipulated, Esther becomes free and shows others how to gain this same freedom.

The novel can be broken down into two sections which show the gradual decline of Esther's mental state: that of multiple pre-and-post suicide attempts. Susan Coyle argues that the "imagery changes markedly prior to and after the suicide attempt that lead to the asylum; the images of pre-breakdown are almost unrelievedly negative" (161). However, imagery of the bell jar is inclusive to the second half of the novel; in fact, the distinct use of the words "bell jar" only appears in the second half—its most noted debut appearing in the fifteenth chapter of the book. Thus, the bell jar itself is actually an image entrapped by the very words of the novel:

"...wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (*The Bell Jar*, 185). In the demarcation of the words "sour air", Plath is speaking of wanting to be outside of the bell jar, and yet she created this imagery to find a space of protection inside of it, as it is her own psychological symbol for Esther's madness. In doing so, Plath is representing yet another paradox of the bell jar and its conflicting supplementary images, as the very bell jar that Esther is trying to escape is also

the one which has put her in her own protective enclosure, allowing her the solitude of the hospital itself.

The Bell Jar traces Esther's journey—from within the bell jar to the world without. Her sense of being enclosed in a bell jar develops in her a definite urge for freedom that she seeks through death, because death for her is not the end but the beginning of a new life with an alternate identity of her own. In "Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process", Lynda K. Bundtzen calls Plath's bell jar "a mental symbol of social oppression that causes Esther's reduction to a still born baby who is unable to grow. This mental stagnation in the jar signifies the psychological state of all 1950s American women" (131). Even though she speaks in absolutist terms, Bundtzen's specific point as to the psychological state of women as a result of male oppression helps bring light to attempts to quell the feminine voice. Esther's sense of social-suppression has caused her to develop an identity crisis, which in turn, creates a psychological space between her own inner and outer selves:

Esther Greenwood's 'psychological jar' is thus formed by the above mentioned social pressures of 1950s America, being the bigger jar itself, causing the dismemberment of self and society. "Servitude, brainwashing, numbness, drugs

that wipe the mind clear, shock treatments—all of these are closely associated in Esther's mind with the continual state and its threat to her creativity. Later, this victimization is made a part of her experience as a mental patient, and a bell jar that descends over all women, suspending them forever in a state of arrested development. (126)

Throughout the second half of the novel, Esther confronts the image of the bell jar continually—each time it is mentioned, she is expressing yet another facet of the experience of living under it. Esther states that “(t)he air of the bell jar wadded around me and I couldn't stir” (186). Now the imagery of the bell jar seems distinctly negative, as it represents both her degrading mental state and her impending placement at a new private hospital. Even though she is in a car—an image that represents freedom—when the image of the bell jar reappears, she is still stifled by the decisions being made for her—the first bell jar. Esther wants to live her own life, but she is incapable of doing so. She wishes for her own death; but in reality is incapable of this as well. Both of these images of repression represent contrasting bell jars, as Esther yearns for a utopia that does not exist—the second bell jar. As a result, Esther has lost all capacity for

autonomy, much like women fighting for equal rights in the 1950s:

The embedded symbolic meaning (of the bell jar) is slightly more obscure. Many critics view the bell jar as a symbol of society's stifling constraints and befuddling mixed messages that trap Sylvia Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood, within its glass dome. However, another often overlooked reality is that the physical, albeit metaphorical suffocation induced by the bell jar is a direct representation of Esther's mental suffocation by the unavoidable settling of depression upon her psyche, and that this circumstance greatly alters the way in which the entire novel can and should be perceived. (Coyle 166)

Esther's reality is affected by this depression, which brings on a continual state of melancholy. The bell jar, in all of its permutations, acts as not only a suppressant on Esther's ability to function mentally, but also on her ability to form and express her true identity.

If the bell jar was only an image of negativity, it would be at this very instance that Plath would unveil it. Instead, the use of the bell jar image is placed much later in the novel, directly before the second round of shock treatments that Esther has, in which Dr.

Nolan explains to Esther that she had formerly experienced a bad treatment. Instead of using the imagery in a negative way, Plath shows her own calm and positive resignation to the impending second round of treatments. "All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air" (215). The removal of the bell jar is powerfully positive. It shows hope and a willingness to escape the bell jar altogether, which works counterintuitively to its necessity as a shield from the outside experiences which have contributed to the breakdown leading to her asylum. Susan Coyle furthers this argument to say that Esther is actually making strides towards sanity through her interactions with Dr. Nolan. At this point in the novel, Esther is attempting to become one of the girls at the institution who receives privileges to the outside world. This shows a desire to be outside of the bell jar, and thus is a sign of a path towards wellness:

One of the first signs of recovery is that the bell jar metaphor changes slightly...The suffocating barrier has moved, and from a close look at the textual progression, the reader can infer that it moves not only from this supposedly superior form of treatment but from the interaction of Esther and Dr.

Nolan and the slow climb out of madness that Esther herself painfully makes. (171)

In addition to trying to regain mental stability, Plath also undertakes the difficult task of distinguishing the world of the physical from that of the spiritual. In life lies the truth of existence, but the idea of the soul and death is otherworldly, and thus spiritual. Baig asserts that, in this instance of the bell jar, "the conflict between physical and spiritual selves brings forth an identity crisis. The protagonist's search for identity results in her masochistic attitude in the form of suicidal tendencies, for she views death as a measure to be free and gain a new identity for herself" (2-3). Faced with the first bell jar of cultural indictment and the second bell jar of societal alienation, Esther's only recourse is to muse about ideas of self-harm.

I rolled onto my back again and made my voice casual 'If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?' Cal seemed pleased. 'I've often thought of that. I'd blow my brains out with a gun.' I was disappointed. It was just like a man to do it with a gun. A fat chance I had of laying my hands on a gun. And even if I did, I wouldn't have a clue as to what part of me to shoot at. (156)

As Esther begins to think about her impending freedom from the facility rather than freedom through suicide, she speaks of the bell jar in a removed metaphorical way, detached from her own experiences like a spectator of her own life rather than a participant: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (237). This shows how the bell jar removes her from the world around her, while also being representative of the world outside of her personal bell jar. The layering of the bell jars then leads her to believe that there is a positive outcome to the death that will occur if the air ceases to fill them—for the jar itself creates a stranglehold around the person in which it encapsulates. Susan Coyle explains how Esther looks at the bell jar in mirrored reflection, once she begins her path to mental recovery:

Later, Esther refers to the bell jar in retrospect...She exhibits an awareness of the bell jar and an analytical separation from it. Her mother had suggested to her that they forget all about her negative experiences, treating them as if they were a bad dream. Esther makes an important assertion in conjunction with her mother's suggestion. (172)

When Esther prepares to finally leave the hospital for good, she fears that the

bell jar will reappear in her life, thus showing her desire to keep living it. "How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again" (241). At this point in the novel, Esther knows that the bell jar is a bad thing, and seems to make a recovery that pivots on the recognition of the bell jar being removed. Even though the image itself might hold a negative connotation, it is the very release of it that allows the use of the bell jar image to become positive once again. "I was my own woman" (223). Esther finally finds the freedom to be herself which helps her heal the identity she holds between herself and the real world.

Sylvia Plath's use of the bell jar illuminates the struggle of the 1950s woman to deal with male dominance by acting as a paradoxical sign of weakness and strength. Even though the bell jar cuts Esther off from her outside world, it also gives her a chance to reflect without society's external pressures. This leads to her own mental recovery, as a result of lifting the bell jar from her own head. The psychological impact the bell jar has on Esther is palpable, yet it also preserves and protects her while she walks the steady climb to recovery from mental illness and depression. In reality, the bell jar still exists. It is only in Esther's clarity that she can find the way to both use and remove it at will. What results of this is

a keen ability to speak in and about a male world which once attempted to suppress her voice. In this way, the bell jar has created Esther's freedom, and has made both a negative and positive impact on the helix of her own life, creating the final paradox: the cause becomes the cure.



Figure 1: DNA Genetic Material Helix; Writing the Body

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