

## A Sociological Approach to Death Wish in *The Bell Jar*

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'Death wish,' as defined by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, is "a desire to die, often that somebody is not aware of" (393). The desire to die is an intriguing psychological phenomenon. However, this may be approached better from a sociological perspective, in that it necessitates an enquiry into the societal factors that impinge on one's death wish, or thoughts of suicide. A term with similar signification, 'death-drive' manifests, as Freud sees, "in the psyche as a tendency toward self-destruction, or more precisely the elimination of tension, which can also be turned outwards, whereby it becomes aggression" (Buchanan 110). In both death wish and death-drive, a person's behavior manifests unmistakable signs of angst, whose severity is noticeable in the sufferer's desperation in combating this problem. As Ian Buchanan writes, "it does not give us pleasure to dwell on a humiliating incident and yet very often we cannot seem to get it out of our head, we keep going over and over it" (110).

While making a sociological approach to death wish, or suicide in particular, in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), this paper examines, in the light of Emile Durkheim's thoughts on suicide, the persona's irresistible desire to die. In *Suicide* (1897), Durkheim analyzes "how even apparently individual decision to commit suicide could be understood as being affected by the different forms of social solidarity in different social settings" (Abercrombie, et al. 107). As for the determining role of society in "this apparently most personal of acts," Durkheim deploys, Gordon Marshall writes, "an aetiological explanation in which the effects (suicides) are evidence of the underlying social currents" (175).

Durkheim views suicide as an individual matter, but considers the suicide rate as social, a 'social fact.' As he observes, social factors are more instrumental in causing suicide than psychological factors. Analyzing Durkheim's thoughts on suicide, Raymond Aron writes: "When an individual is alone and desperate enough to kill himself, it is still – speaking in Durkheim's manner – society which is present in the consciousness of the unhappy man; it is society, more than individual history, which governs this solitary act" (35). Aron also highlights a significant distinction pertaining to Durkheim's study: "psychological predisposition, social determination"

(37). This paper aims at contextualizing death wish in *The Bell Jar* in the light of this important distinction.

Considering Durkheim's primacy to the social in preference of the psychological, it is pertinent to see if Plath's death wish, or the death wish of the persona in her works stems from their essentially personal traits, or engendered by formidable social factors. Aron further goes on to write, "If certain individuals commit suicide, it is in all probability because they were predisposed to it by their psychological make up, by nervous weakness or neurotic disturbances. But the same social circumstances which create the suicidogenic impulses create the psychological predisposition, because individuals living in modern society have refined and consequently vulnerable sensibilities" (44).

Durkheim talks primarily about three types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, and anomic. In the case of egoistic suicide, with which this paper concerns itself, "the individual is insufficiently integrated into society, and so is not subject to the collective forces that prevent suicide – and, indeed, experiences an isolation and detachment conducive to it" (Marshall 653). As Aron writes, "Egoistic suicide tends to be characterized by a state of apathy, an absence of attachment to life" (44). Further, it may not be entirely possible for someone, for reasons deemed personal to him or her, to integrate into a society in which he or she lives. One's ultimate decision not to live could either be a rebellion against a frustrating social order, or against oneself since thoughts that the world would not fit, or one feels he would not fit in the world. The suicide feels his or her act as justified and honorable and values the sanctity and insularity of the act as its only *raison d etre*.

In *The Bell Jar*, or in "the intense psychological poetry" of Plath, we see the persona's troubled psychological condition and her desperate loneliness in a world to which she cannot belong (Peck 80). As Ifor Evans writes, Plath's poetry

employs startling images and violent juxtapositions in order to convey her own inner states of feeling; despite the intensity of the feelings her technical power was always impressive. She left a sizeable amount of poetry which is unique in its highly controlled treatment of extreme psychic experience" (372).

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's anguish is exacerbated by the stressors from the physical environment. However, accepting the fact that human lives are fraught with vicissitudes, it is necessary to have capacity for endurance, self-possession in the face of miseries and strength to

confront troubles. In the absence of this strength or preparedness to face miseries, one may be unhappy in life. From the biography of Plath, we know that her life is a chapter of accidents. "When one knows Sylvia Plath's work through and through, and has penetrated her inner topography, the confusion, hate and madness become frighteningly apparent" (Holbrook 357). Although the American New Critical reading of *The Bell Jar* might make one dissociate the purported autobiographical elements in the novel, Esther Greenwood's tribulation echoes Plath's ordeal. Esther's journey is an odyssey, as much as Plath's; a saga of travail where relationships are put to trial in the crucible of time. In both we find a susceptibility to death wish that continually overpowers them by its might and recurrence.

The beginning of *The Bell Jar* introduces us to the psyche of Esther, a girl of nineteen, whose dream to become a writer is frustrated by her perception of nihilism. But what is noticeable is her perception of being different from other girls – a difference that forebodes abnormality. As she says, she could not get herself to react, and she felt very still and empty. This awareness of Esther takes us into the center of the conflict, that of a consuming void which is to engulf her soon. It is important that the smack of morbidity presented by the picture of electrocution with which the novel starts adumbrates the speaker's nausea. Her antipathy to electrocution is generated by an excessive dreadfulness of this anathema that she thinks as most horrible. Thus we begin to feel the psychic constitution of Esther whose expressed horror at electrocution conceals a deep-rooted disquiet within.

The novel gradually unfolds the different facets of Esther's personality and mental make-up, or in particular, her eccentricities. We also come to know that Esther does not like the company of her friends with whom she left for New York. She finds these girls awfully bored to her and that such girls make her sick. It is understandable that this disinterestedness of Esther may be due to finding an essential mismatch between her tastes and that of her friends, but this disinterestedness to befriend does not augur well insofar as the importance of socializing is concerned. Again, her feelings about the conjugal life of Jay Cee, her boss, do also reveal an important aspect of Esther's mind as to human relationship: "I always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together" (6). In Chapter Two of the novel, Plath takes us further into the recesses of Esther's mind, demonstrating the effects of alienation which the persona has inflicted upon itself. Esther's problem, indeed, is the problem of belonging: nothing interests her, and she cannot belong to anything. However, her problem is largely ontological: "The

silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence" (17).

Esther's anguish is at times baffling, and the defense mechanism of the hot-bath she employs to fight her distress is symptomatic of a deep trouble within. As she says in the novel, whenever she feels sad or gripped by thoughts of death, or feels so nervous that she cannot sleep, she likes to take a hot-bath.

Before we come to know what Esther is, she happens to introduce herself, in a somewhat telltale way, as "a split personality or something" (20). That which shows a presentiment of neurosis in Esther is found in her continued atrophy before she comes to New York. As Esther reveals, she loves food very much, but no matter how much she eats, she never puts on weight: "With one exception I've been the same weight for ten years" (22). This, however, cannot be dismissed as a trivial matter. The possibility of some neurotic problem, fear, or anxiety that disturbs her and stunts her physical growth cannot be ruled out. In reality, stress casts a deleterious impact on one's health as confirmed by medical research. Esther's poor physical condition mirrors her internal, mental anguish.

In the novel, Esther goes on revealing aspects of her personality that help us understand her state of mind. Whereas girls of her age would like to delight in the thoughts of marriage, to Esther, it is a decided impossibility in that she has intended not to marry: "I never intended to get married" (24). Plath gives a hint of Esther's depressive background to suggest that her neurosis is generated by her environment. As Esther says in the novel, her German-speaking father, dead since she was nine, "came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia" (30). This confirms the miasma of such ambience on the formation of Esther's mental make-up.

One of the things that exacerbates Esther's disinterestedness about life is her disillusionment of her relationship with Buddy Willard. Her relationship with Buddy seems to make autobiographical references to Plath's own experiences of a troubled relationship. Esther gives a shocking portrayal of Buddy to reveal his true self. What pains Esther is that Buddy Willard is a hypocrite, and she does not know this. She thinks him to be the most wonderful boy, adores him from a distance for five years, but soon realizes that he is an "awful hypocrite" (49). Esther is discomfited by Buddy's desire to marry her, and later in the novel, she expresses exasperation by highlighting his hypocrisy: "...I found out how he had fooled me all those years and what a hypocrite he was" (58).

Another important facet of Esther's thinking is her ideas about virginity coupled with a

primacy on the purity of relationship. In her interrogation of Buddy in order to know whether he was faithful in their relationship, and upon finding that he is not, she gets terribly upset. Buddy's confession demolishes her world of make-believe, established on the foundation of faith. To Esther's question, "Have you ever had an affair with anyone, Buddy?," Buddy replies, "Well, yes, I have" (65). This experience of deceit shakes Esther's faith in the goodness of human relationship. Buddy's admission of guilt, far from ennobling him puts to question the loyalty and indispensability that matter in a relationship. Esther condemns Buddy's loss of innocence and despairs at his flagrant pretence of purity ballasted by his eulogy to her beauty. Esther, thus, strikes at the root of all that is pretence at the base of love.

Esther's thought of retaliating against the unfaithfulness of Buddy by herself surrendering to a similar imperfection shows the degree of pain she undergoes following Buddy's revelation. Apparently, a sort of tit-for-tat, but it is, in reality, a woman's bewilderment in the face of dishonesty: "Ever since Buddy Willard had told me about that waitress I had been thinking I ought to go out and sleep with somebody myself. Sleeping with Buddy wouldn't count, though because he would still be one person ahead of me, it would have to be with somebody else" (74).

In line with Durkheim's emphasis on social factors that engender in a person death wish or thoughts of suicide, leading to a progressive reduction of the zest for life, this paper argues that Esther's disenchantment with life may not be necessarily taken as her incapability to cope with life's problems or her failure to socialize, but a realization on her part that it is time she salvaged herself from the tyrannies of deceit. Further, it is not that she is a weak individual with execrable lack of strength as suicides are generally thought of; rather, her death wish is backed by a rationale, although quite personal, that defies any generalized assessment of, or a dichotomy between what is just and what is not.

A shade of this antinomy is reflected in Esther's thoughts on man and woman, based on an article mailed to her by her mother. As Esther tells, the main point of the article underscores the difference of a man's world from a woman's world and a man's emotions from a woman's emotions. What the article further says is that only marriage can bridge these differences. The article, thus, highlights an extremely important role of marriage. But Esther's plans for matrimony are foiled by her awareness of chauvinism: "It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? 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" (77). Esther further goes on to strike at the root of this hypocrisy by reducing the world to sharply polarized opposites. The import of her observations is that what distinguishes the one from the other is simply a carnal qualification. Esther feels that the world is not perhaps divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, but "divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another" (77).

Esther's diagnosis of a problem in her that impedes her from being interested in marriage is the result of a stance she takes as to the possible effects a relationship might entail. When she thinks of developing relationship with Constantin, she also winces in no time thinking of her experience with Buddy. She hesitates upon the apprehension of repetition of that experience. However, Esther's discretion is affected by a stymieing fear of the consequences founded upon the twin pillars of her fear of ordinariness, and a clinical distrust of worthiness. Esther understands her perfectionism and expectations of rectitude as the most retarding factors in her zest for life. Esther pinpoints her problem further: "The same thing happened over and over: I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all. / That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married" (79).

Esther expresses displeasure with a fossilized patriarchal system that gives little importance to the dignity of women, and this is instrumental in embittering her mind toward marriage. She could see through the film of a man's affections his insidious intent to dominate. Esther takes no time to understand that beneath the veneer of a man's love for a woman, lavishly demonstrated by roses, kisses and restaurant dinners, there lurks in him a despicable sense of superiority: "to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat" (80).

In Chapter Eight, Esther tells us that she is a neurotic. In her conversation with Buddy, she accentuates again, her decision: "I'm never going to get married," and when Buddy says, "You'll change your mind," Esther replies, "No. My mind's made up" (89). We also see towards the end of the novel, Esther's significant reflections on a stereotype that seems to make a patriarchal definition of women's lives: "But I wasn't getting married. There ought I thought to be a ritual for being born twice – patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (233).

Esther presents her neurotic condition, and while on the one hand she seems to be

confirmed in her stand about neurosis and marriage, on the other she typifies an extreme vacillation. Her thought on the 'neurotic' is percipient: "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days" (90). In this Chapter, we get another autobiographical reference to Plath. While Esther thinks of Buddy's presence in her life and how it affects her, we understand to what Plath refers to: "'You were doing fine,' a familiar voice informed my ear, 'until that man stepped into your path'." (93). On different occasions, Plath's works make references to her father Otto Plath, and Ted Hughes, her husband. As Christopher MacGowan writes, "Both embody a haunting, oppressive presence that she cannot set aside" (148).

*The Bell Jar* movingly presents the tragic condition of Esther, battered by bouts of depression and neurosis, and descriptions of her medical treatment. We see how shocking the condition is when she despairs: "I can't sleep. I can't read" (121). What pains Esther is her confirmed perception that none can understand her agony. When she comes to Doctor Gordon, a psychiatrist, she is dismayed to find his carefree attitude to her miseries:

'Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong.'  
I turned the words over suspiciously, like round, sea-polished pebbles that might suddenly put out a claw and change into something else.  
What did I *think* was wrong?  
That made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong, I only *thought* it was wrong.  
(124)

Esther has many reasons to dislike the world, and the reasons are evidently social. Esther's periodic descent into melancholia and her attempt to commit suicide are very saddening. In Chapter Thirteen, she recounts: "That morning I had tried to hang myself," and "Only my case was incurable" (152, 153). Durkheim, in his study of suicide, does not altogether reject the impact of any psychological predisposition but underscores social determination: "Durkheim admits that there is a psychological predisposition to suicide, a predisposition which can be explained in psychological or psychopathological terms. Given certain circumstances, neuropaths are indeed more likely to kill themselves. But, Durkheim says, the force which determines the suicide is not psychological but social" (Aron 37).

What particularly irks Esther is hypocrisy: "I also hate people to ask cheerfully how you are when they know you're feeling like hell and expect you to say 'Fine'" (170). A note of despair is seen when she says: "But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (230). But she gathers strength to live: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. / I am, I am, I am" (233).

A similar manifestation of the speaker's death wish is also found in Plath's poetry where she portrays "a disturbing, anguished vision" (Peck 81). As Lillian Feder writes:

From the 1950s, through the 1970s, many American poets – Hayden Carruth, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, as well as Ginsberg and Lowell – expressed the most extreme condition of modern alienation in autobiographical accounts of the dissolution of the self in madness. This recent preoccupation with madness differs in fundamental respects from that of the surrealists, who believed that the products of psychic automatism, however mad, served to unite the poet with others in a revolutionary consciousness at once social and aesthetic. (347)

We see in Plath's poetry a persona writhing in pain, rebelling against pretence, and rebelling against herself. The persona stands nonplussed as to her ontological condition. Stating that Plath "idolizes suicide," Holbrook highlights in Plath's work "symbolism of inner disturbance" (533).

In her poem "Daddy," we see this anguished picture:

At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue (MacGowan 149).

In "Ariel," we also find this anguish: "Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning" (MacGowan 150). Talking about Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, and Sylvia Plath, Holbrook writes: "In each of these poets there are moments when the writer seems to be raving to himself or herself, seething with hate. At the other extreme, there is another common feature: recognition of a deeply immature self, a child, a puppy, or an infant which seems as if it has never been born, and which seeks to begin *to be*. In this we may find the expression of a deep-seated predicament of the Western soul, as expressed by Sylvia Plath in the phrase, 'I have a self to recover': the sense that the full potentialities of the self have never been

found, at the level of being, and so life seems to lack meaning" (Holbrook, 1991. 533-534).

In *The Bell Jar*, the sociology of suicide demonstrates the impact of social factors on Esther in that what we think of as psychological factors causing death wish are also influenced by social factors. Esther's death wish is born out of her frustration, her disenchantment with life, along with her disinterestedness to confront disorder. The rift between her pleasant expectations from life and the realities she cannot defend saddens her. In this case, her condition is also related to anomic suicide which is "characterized by a state of irritation or disgust, irritation resulting from the many occasions of disappointment afforded by modern existence, disgust being the extreme form of perception of the disproportion between aspirations and satisfactions" (Aron 44). What apparently seems to be the person's essentially individual responses to life and her inability to confront the afflictions of time does point to a stifling social order, punctuated by tacit injunctions of patriarchy.

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