

# Distorted Female Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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## Abstract

The paper examines the concept of identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and explores the definition of female identity from the point of view of the self and by the public. Different approaches to defining female identity are examined by comparing studies on gender theories and analysing the roles of women in the period of the 1950s. The study takes into account the personal life of Sylvia Plath, focusing on several works written by close friends or experts and using Plath's own thoughts and comments from her journals and personal diaries. The next part of the paper outlines the similarities between Plath's life experiences and her most famous character, Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*. Using direct quotes from the novel, the paper focuses on how identity is formed and then shattered in a society where women had to follow strict rules without the opportunity to experience life on their own, through their own choices. The final part of the study presents the findings of an in-depth analysis, the aim of which was to show what the consequences of a deeply repressed individual identity can be, and how much damage can be done to someone's mental state by hiding behind masks.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath; *The Bell Jar*; female identity; personal desire; mental illness; depression; feminism; gender

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## Introduction

Defining female identity is a complex task. The first thing to remember is that identity is always influenced by the individual self and by the public. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Kegan Gardiner are concerned with female identity and women's writing. In her work *The Second Sex* (1990), Beauvoir goes back to Aristotle and St. Thomas to discuss their definition of woman ("an imperfect man", "an incidental being") (Beauvoir 1990, 307), which suggests that humanity is male, and therefore woman is not defined as herself, but as a relative of him (quoted in Puskás, 2014: 44).

In her work *On Female Identity and Writing by Women* (1981), Gardiner draws attention to Carolyn Heilbrun's book *Reinventing Womanhood* (1971), where she quotes Heilbrun's words: "(...) successful women are "male-identified" but that it is

a “failure” for a “woman to take her identity from her man” (Gardiner 1981, 347). She goes on to claim that “female identity is a process” and that its formation depends on the mother-daughter bond (Gardiner, 1981: 349). To apply her idea, this may explain why women’s writing is a bit more sensitive: she can never form her identity without personal desires and needs. Gardiner also considers Erik Erikson’s idea that a woman goes through a so-called “identity crisis”. According to Erikson, a woman’s identity is properly formed when “(...) the person with a successfully achieved sense of individual identity feels unique, whole, and coherent, although in pathological cases identity formation may fail and the person suffer from “identity diffusion” (Gardiner 1981, 349). He also states that this formation occurs in the lives of both sexes (Erikson 1959, 116).

Gardiner summarises this difference as follows:

“(...) female identity is a process, and primary identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men. Female gender identity is more stable than male gender identity. Female infantile identifications are less predictable than male ones. Female social roles are more rigid and less varied than men’s. And the female counterpart of the male identity crisis may occur more diffusely, at a different stage, or not at all” (Gardiner 1981, 354).

In their book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1971), Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann discuss the constituents of identity. They do not specifically intend to provide the exact definition of identity, they take into account the many aspects of it. As a result, they emphasise that identity has several constituents. They identify it with two terms: ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’. According to them, ‘reality’ is “a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition” (Berger – Luckmann 1971, 13). They emphasise that ‘knowledge’ is “(...) the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” (Berger – Luckmann, 1971: 13). This means that both of the above terms depend on social context. They examine identity from a very similar perspective and claim that our identity, just like our understanding of reality and knowledge, has a strong connection with society.

In her study *“Jej inakost, jej identita?” [Her Difference, Her Identity]* (1994), Zuzana Kiczková largely agrees with Berger and Luckmann. However, she claims that female identity has also been determined by the biological category of being a woman (quoted in Puskás 2014, 45). She adds the category of ‘gender’ to the constituents of identity. She refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s well-known idea of becoming a woman rather than being born one (Kiczková 1994, 13). Berger and Luckmann call the human body as ‘organism’, while Kiczková declares that it is not just a given organism, but something that is framed by society and by one’s own self.

Going one step further, even the body itself can influence identity. Biological factors play a major role in shaping physical development. The distinctive sexual organs and the secondary sexual characteristics already cause a sense of differentialization. Everything that women experience with their bodies has a huge impact

on them. Besides that, the body can influence female identity in a social context. The expression that women are ‘the weaker sex’ is already an example of this. Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson write “It is generally true that the males are more active, energetic, eager, passionate, and variable; the females more passive, conservative, sluggish, and stable” (quoted in Moi 2000, 17-18).

Beauvoir states that the body is not a thing, it is connected with constant change: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1989, 273). However, this statement does not refer to womanhood - to the state of being a woman -, but rather to the definition of ‘femininity’, determined by society and social expectations. This may be the first manifestation of gender theory. According to the Oxford Dictionaries, the word ‘gender’ means “the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences, rather than differences in biology”.<sup>1</sup> It is often confused with the biological term of ‘sex’, the fact whether a person was born to be male or female. Society takes this into account and, on its authority assigns people with expected personalities and roles. These result in the so-called gender stereotypes, such as ‘boys don’t cry’, ‘women can’t drive’, ‘a woman’s place is in the kitchen’ or ‘men are unfaithful’. These stereotypes have often nothing to do with biology. Women and men acquire these norms from an early age. Society teaches them how a girl and a boy should behave, and if they behave correctly, they are praised and approved by their environment. However, individuals with diverging gender-norm attendances will not get accepted by society.

According to gender theory, there is nothing wrong with individual differences; women and men have huge personal discrepancies even within their own group. Confrontation begins when society claims that strong and dominant features (such as autonomy, independence, ambition or competitiveness) can only be described as masculine, and if a woman tries to evoke these qualities, people immediately attach negative labels to her such as *mean*, *egocentric*, *careerist*, *bossy* or *vain*.

If we look at Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, this imagined view of the perfect body type is often present. Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of the novel, frequently claims that her body conforms to society’s standards; however, this makes her feel subordinate. Believing that no man is good enough for her first leads to self-doubt and it eventually paves the way for a total mental breakdown.

## Sylvia Plath – a woman, an author, a wife

It is possible to draw several parallels between Sylvia Plath’s life and Esther Greenwood’s story. To understand the different points of view and to see through Plath’s life, it is most important to pay close attention to several Plath biographies and studies, such as Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* (1981), Paul Alexander’s *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (1991), Alfred Alvarez’s *The Savage God: A study of suicide* (1971), Louis Simpson’s *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Gin-*

<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/gender?q=gender>

berg, *Sylvia Plath and Robert Rowell* (1978), Helen Vendler's *Coming of Age as a Poet* (2003) or Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991).

In addition to the works listed above, Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* (1995) also focuses on Sylvia Plath's relationships with her husband, Ted Hughes, and his sister, Olwyn Hughes. As a result, the reader is able to see a different side of Plath's story: Ted's introductions to Sylvia's journals show an intimate connection between husband and wife. In addition, it is Hughes who first begins to compare Sylvia's two faces: "when a real self finds language, and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event" (Malcolm 1995, 6).

Malcolm claims that Plath's true identity was really born when she began to write her *Ariel* poems. This was the time when she finally decided to reveal her true self. Before that, she had to live with the strict views of the public:

"The history of her life (...) is a signature story of the fearful, double-faced fifties. Plath embodies in a vivid, almost emblematic way the schizoid character of the period. She is the divided self par excellence" (Malcolm 1995, 21).

Sylvia Plath was the embodiment of the 1950s expectations: her blonde hair, red lips and pretty face were the perfect mask. As Alfred Alvarez writes: "She wore jeans and a neat shirt, briskly American: bright, clean, competent, like a young woman in a cookery advertisement, friendly and yet rather distant" (Alvarez 1971, 7). However, behind that mask, no one knew exactly what was going on. While on the outside she was the perfect American dream, sparkling and lovely, Dido Merwin in her memoir *Vessel of Wrath* points out:

"We cannot know Sylvia! There is no way to judge by the surface. She talks about her with sharp sarcasm that she "used up all the hot water, repeatedly helped herself from the fridge (breakfasting on what one had planned to serve for lunch, etc.), and rearranged the furniture in their bedroom" (quoted in Malcolm 1995, 23).

Merwin paints a new picture of a selfish, unstable, perfectionist and humourless woman. However, according to biographers, this duality was not at all surprising at the time. Anne Stevenson writes honestly about the sexual frustrations of middle-class teenage girls who had to live by the strict rules:

"Everything was permissible to girls in the way of intimacy except the one thing such intimacies were intended to bring about. Both partners in the ritual of experimental sex conceded that "dating" went something like this: preliminary talking and polite mutual inspection led to dancing, which often shifted into "necking," which – assuming continuous progress – concluded in the quasi-masturbation of "petting" on the family sofa, or, in more affluent circumstances, in the back seat of a car. Very occasionally intercourse might, inadvertently, take place; but as a rule, if the partners went to the same school or considered themselves subject to the same moral pressures, they stopped just short of it" (quoted in Malcolm 1995, 19).

Malcolm made an interview with Olwyn Hughes in which she described how childishly Sylvia used to solve her problems with other people. This attitude of hiding – that she would always run after her husband, Ted Hughes when she found herself in front of someone, who did not agree with her ideas – may confirm the image of the missing father figure. However, it was not really the absence of this figure that caused her instability. As seen in *The Bell Jar*, it is strongly suggested that it was her mother. Mrs Plath did everything she could to avoid being compared to Mrs Greenwood, and it was her aim to prove that her daughter was also very different from Esther. She published Sylvia's letters and diaries after her death to show that "the not-nice persona of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* was just Plath's sick "false self," and that her healthy "real self" was a kindly, "service-oriented" good girl" (Malcolm 1995, 40). It sounds as if Mrs Plath proudly represented the public's understanding of identity formation, acting exactly as the person that not only Esther but even her own daughter Sylvia did not want to be. Olwyn is the one who corrects this ingrained misconception; she is the one who declares that not every woman in the 1950s was a perfect commercial figure: "She was always imagining she was this sweet emotional girl. But she wasn't" (Malcolm 1995, 54).

It is perhaps irresponsible to claim that Sylvia's true self can be detected through her letters written to her mother. These letters are full of white lies and their only purpose seems to calm her passionate maternal emotions. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* shows a more truthful picture, but even these records sometimes seem to be far from her real thoughts. This perfectly illustrates how much she wanted to be like her mother, who was also a scholarship winner, successful at school, determined and well-known. However, she had to realise that she would never be as socially accepted as her mother. In her diaries, Sylvia is extremely honest about love and men. At the very beginning she writes: "I am afraid. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day – spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free (...)" (quoted in Simpson 1978, 93).

Society tries to conceive women that they need a man in their lives to achieve 'the norm'. In Sylvia's case, the girls around her started to have boyfriends, they were socially accepted, and when a boy was introduced to Plath for the first time, she felt wonderful, but not because she was in love. It was because she felt integrated, like she had accomplished an achievement. She tells her mother that once when she had no date for the weekend, she was feeling completely miserable. When she did get a phone call, later she says, almost humorously, that she was "all the time ranting (...) on how never to commit suicide, because something unexpected always happens (...)" (quoted in Simpson 1978, 95). The contrast between always living in a state of high anticipation and only sometimes saying out loud what she really thinks appears this early in Sylvia's story.

Plath imagined life as a fictional dream come true. As the reader can see, Esther in *The Bell Jar* – like Sylvia herself – tried to find some kind of protection from life in love. Her life was full of different boyfriends and lovers. She often writes about herself in her diary, as if she were writing about the story of a character in a book. When her days were not interesting enough, she added a little love to the chapter: "Is it some dread lack which makes my alternatives so deadly? Some

feeble dependence on men which makes me throw myself on their protection and care and tenderness?" (quoted in Malcolm 1995, 116). She is surprised that she cannot have everything the way she wants it. Society's mirror image of perfection is a lie. She needs desire in her life to make her feel alive. If there is nothing left to desire, the meaning of life disappears, too. According to Simpson, this might be the reason why she wanted to be a writer: "When something she wrote was accepted she was free" (Simpson 1978, 98). It seems, for her, the only way out was to be successful, ergo free, or not be good enough and commit suicide. Sylvia wanted to be a poet, but it seemed impossible for her to achieve this goal. Even the girls who were with her at the magazine in New York saw this opportunity to work and write for a magazine as a one-time experience, and they were sure that after marriage they would never have to deal with it again. They wanted to find a good husband with a great job, have children and live happily ever after. Sylvia wanted to achieve that happiness on her own.

Plath admitted that when she got the chance to study in New York after years of living in a small village, it felt like a slap in the face when she actually spent some time in the city. It stank. She arrived there with the dream of becoming a famous writer and poet, but what she actually saw around her was a breakdown. The society she found herself in believed in electroshock therapy to cure the individual's desire to have an independent, personal identity and thus managed to drive people to madness. It only looked like the American dream from a distance, but underneath it all the pressure was just simply too much.

It was only when Plath got out of New York that she could act like her true self. Malcolm points out this important factor, Sylvia's alienation from her hometown and from America. During her time spent in England, she slowly but surely stopped using her American accent, and as for her appearance, her non-natural glossy blonde hair was now dark again and loose, waist-length and no longer soft and clean:

"In harsh England Plath had found a refuge from (as she called it in *The Bell Jar*) "the motherly breath of the suburbs" of Eisenhower America. Here her wicked wit could flourish and her writing could break out of the caul of obedient mannerism that encased its early examples. The emergence of the "true self" as a writer was a shedding of Plath's American identity along with the other "false" identities she cast off. She did not write – and could not have written – *The Bell Jar* far or *Ariel* in her native Massachusetts. The pitiless voice of the *Ariel* poet was a voice that had rid itself of its American accent" (Malcolm 1995, 64).

It is fascinating to read criticism and reviews from this period that focus on Sylvia's writing style, without really knowing her life. Anne Stevenson had her own opinion of her – as a woman, just as Alfred Alvarez tried to understand her poems as a man in the 1950s. While Stevenson in her writings tried to get closer to her by comparing Sylvia's early life and the time in England with her very own (Stevenson 1998), Alvarez admits in his study that he did not even notice Sylvia at first, calling her "an American wife" because she fit into the American dream so well that she became average (Alvarez 1971, 20).

In reality, both of them were fooled. For Stevenson, Sylvia was a nice, kind girl, tired of public rules, someone who had escaped to another country, far away from the stifling cleanliness. Alvarez, on the other hand, characterised her as a typical American housewife, who wants to try out something new without crossing the line, fitting into the requirements and being “serious, gifted, withheld, and still partly under the massive shadow of her husband” (Alvarez 1971, 6). After years of forming a friendship, Alvarez began to recognise the innate talent Sylvia had. Whereas at first he thought Sylvia just had a vivid imagination, later he had to realise that she actually experienced the things she wrote about. He is the first to hear about Sylvia’s suicide attempts, straight from her own mouth. Alvarez soon discovers something disturbing beneath the surface: these attempts had all slowly become a part of her identity. She did them because she wished to die, but she did not. And, for her, trying to die also worked as an experiment.

According to Alvarez, Sylvia did not want to die because she wanted to escape from this world in this way. On one hand, her morals would not allow it. On the other hand, she saw this situation as an opportunity of being reborn, to get rid of her past and her history. She saw death as a challenge to help her finally become the person she actually was. With each attempt, she killed a part of herself that was supposed to fit into society – separately. She killed the frightened little girl mourning her father when she took the pills. She then killed the quiet girl who did not want to do anything dangerous when she deliberately had the skiing accident. She killed the impressionable puppet when she intentionally drove off the road. And she tried to kill the housewife figure when she put her head in the oven (Alvarez 1971).

Plath ran after challenges, because society did not allow her to experience things as another person. “It was part of the fierceness with which she had worked as a student, passing exam after exam brilliantly, effortlessly, hungrily. With the same intensity she immersed herself in her children, her riding, her bee-keeping, even her cooking; everything had to be done well and to the fullest” (Alvarez 1971, 25). In some way, she had to kill off the aborted or failed personalities and then try over again.

## **Broken female identity: the story of Esther Greenwood**

It is safe to say that one of the most important themes in *The Bell Jar* is the female ideal. Looking back in history, the 1950s was a difficult period for women to find out who they are and form their identity. They were defined by the rules and expectations of society, not only by their own needs. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood often explains how much she differs from this ideal image. She always mentions her desire to fit in. Her longing to be able to do the same things that she envies the other girls for is transformed into a big, dark cloud over her head.

In his study “*The Development of Depression: A Cognitive Model*” (1974), psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck notes that the body as a factor can cause dangerous effects in someone’s life. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther’s persona was affected by another,

damaging factor. Beck claims that the loss of a parent can have just such a consequence (Beck 1974).

He states that the loss of an important role model in life not only causes early traumatic experiences, but also long-term damage and even depression. The father figure, a strong, powerful, masculine person was missing from Esther's childhood and, as Plath mentioned in her diaries, perhaps this could also lead to her having a softer, more sensitive personality. Esther mentions her father three times in the novel, and on one occasion she talks about his 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 1996, 71).

In the absence of a father figure, Esther had been influenced by her mother's role: Mrs Greenwood, with her constant passivity and contradictions, led her own daughter into a world of depression. She is the only element in the novel that is openly described as a damaging factor. Esther refers to her as: "(...) the worst. She never scolded me, but kept begging me, with a sorrowful face, to tell her what she had done wrong" (Plath 1996: 195). Mrs Greenwood acts also as a barricade to Esther's recovery. She believes that Esther's depression is just a simple condition that she can easily overcome, and when Esther decides to leave Dr Gordon's sanatorium, she even says: "I knew my baby wasn't like that (...) Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital (...) I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (Plath 1996, 140).

When Esther meets Constantin at the UN, she also notices a Russian girl, who, like the boy, was a simultaneous interpreter. It is thrilling for her to finally see a girl so smart and independent, and she wishes "(...) with all my heart I could crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another" (Plath 1996: 71). But then, she honestly admits "It mightn't make me any happier, but it would be one more little pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles" (Plath 1996, 71). This is the point where it is very clear to see how important it is for Esther to fit into society. She never speaks about the things she is good at. She only sees the deficiencies that make her not good enough. She lists all the things she could not do: cook, take shorthand, dance, ride a horse, ski, or even study. The only time she thinks she is good at something – majoring in English – she is forced to realise she has deluded herself. Not being half as clever as the other students at her mother's college, which she had always looked down on because "(...) it was co-ed, and filled with people who couldn't get scholarship to the big eastern colleges" (Plath 1996, 120).

She often asks herself what she is good for. "(...) I felt dreadfully inadequate. (...) The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end" (Plath 1996, 72). Esther does not realise that these things require not only knowledge but also persistence. She just wants to achieve more and more, but when she gets close to her goal, she suddenly backs off.

Esther is insecure on her own, yet the idea of working for other people makes her feel terrible: "(...) I hated the idea of serving man in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (Plath 1996, 72). She wants to become great through her own efforts, not by waiting for men to throw her scraps. Therefore, the idea of



marriage is always on Esther's mind throughout the story. She first mentions her intention when she is still in New York, at the Ladies' Day banquet: "It was a joke because I never intended to get married (...)" (Plath 1996, 24). She is determined to be an independent single woman and often claims that she never wants to have children and she hates them because they make her sick: "If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad" (Plath 1996, 213). However, even in this arrangement, her duality becomes evident.

These feelings are intensified by the fact that one of Esther's greatest concerns is chastity: "When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue" (Plath 1996, 77). It is hard for her to understand why women should preserve their virginity, while men could be "able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (Plath 1996, 77). It is like a major milestone in her life and she wants to experience something similar. However, not being able to live like men and her inability to make similar choices makes her feel stiff. This thought is so strong in her mind that she actually develops an ideology which she projects onto the world around her. She sees "(...) people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another" (Plath 1996, 77). She understands that women and men are different in many ways, but does not understand why she could not have the same experiences as men. Furthermore, everything gets more complicated by the fact that women can get pregnant. In the 1950s, a woman's most important role was to keep her household under control. As Esther explains several times, women took care of their husbands, children and home. They could only have jobs like being a teacher or a nurse. Of course, that did not mean they could not want more. However, society was not able to accept or even support a well-balanced relationship between motherhood and having a career. Even as women's rights and positions began to level out, society still had its strict ideas about this matter.

Esther uses the image of Dodo Conway, a mother of seven children as an example. Every time she sees a child, she thinks of Dodo. She despises her and envies her at the same time. At other times, it seems as if she was just repeating the excuses of other people. She wants to believe their words and tries hard to fit into society, but it seems that there is no real solution to prevent women from ending up so miserable and broken. It is already a big problem for her not to be able to meet the demands of society: "How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway?" (Plath 1996, 213). When she talks to Dr Nolan, she honestly admits that one of her biggest fear is to get pregnant: "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb (...) A man doesn't have to worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (Plath 1996, 212).

Esther wants to imagine a world where her choices are not dictated by social expectations and where she can finally make her own decisions. She feels that she is "(...) climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me,

because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless ...” (Plath 1996, 213). In order to do this, she must follow her own rules rather than those set by others, and it does not matter that what she is doing is strictly speaking illegal, because for the very first time she proudly declares, “I was my own woman” (Plath 1996, 213).

## Under the bell jar

The gaze is an important motif in *The Bell Jar*. In Esther's story, sight plays a huge and important role. She often refers to it as something primary in her life, but not in an everyday sense. For her, the ability to see is an essential tool, it equals to experiencing reality. According to E. Ann Kaplan, gaze is not necessarily the ‘weapon’ of men, but the possession and activation of the gaze comes from the masculine position of the people (Kaplan 1983, 30). At the beginning of *The Bell Jar*, this hierarchy is initially reversed. Esther was the spectator, therefore, someone with a masculine position, and this – because she is a woman, defined her as a monster. Esther objectifies men with her fixed gaze: the scene when Buddy Willard undresses, or when Constantin is sleeping. In both instances, Esther is on a higher hierarchical level because in the first case she is not undressing, so she is not being objectified, and in the second case, Constantin simply cannot see her. However, as happens in *The Bell Jar*, this hierarchy can shift. After one of her suicide attempts, Esther becomes temporarily blind, so she loses her ‘weapon’.

When Esther is confronted with events she has only been able to imagine so far, she once again uses her gaze as a tool. The first time, when she sees a baby being born or while Buddy shows her corpses and babies in big glass bottles, she remains calm all along. She even says: “I could see something like that every day” (Plath 1996, 63). Something similar happens, when she sees a man naked for the first time. She observes and stores up this new information, but nothing more happens. For Esther, all these moments have a higher meaning in her life. They are the key to living freely. However, that is also the reason why she cannot make a decision without hesitation.

After Buddy calls her neurotic, she replies sharply: “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” (Plath 1996, 89). And she does. She goes back and forth whenever she can. However, as the story goes on she starts to feel like she is stuck under a bell jar. Whilst in the beginning she was sure in her disparity from other girls, she could still breathe freely; she did not feel the pressure in such a depressing way. At first, Esther only examines it from the outside, studying it as a physical object – which it is. The glass bottles in which the tiny, dead babies' bodies are kept are just visual aids to her, nothing more. But as bad things start to happen to her more often, she also begins to fall deeper into the depth of depression. There are moments, when she feels “(...) very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel (...)” (Plath 1996, 2), but she is not surrounded by a glass that separates her from others.

The glass wall starts to descend, when Esther goes home and starts to spend the summer with her mother. The mere thought of spending a whole summer alone with her mother makes her sick. This sudden feeling of isolation and uncertainty leads her slowly but surely into a viscous spiral. When she tries to change her situation, an invisible wall stops her, “as if it had collided with a pane of glass” (Plath 1996, 114). When she looks through the glass, everything appears to be motionless: “I knew perfectly well the cars were making noise, and the people in them and behind the lit windows of the buildings were making a noise, and the river was making a noise, but I couldn’t hear a thing. The city hung in my window, flat as a poster” (Plath 1996, 17).

Esther starts to feel the lack of air quickly. Her head aches, she cannot think, every object around her seems to be a patchwork. She has no energy and becomes tired all the time. Strangely, on some occasions she is almost satisfied with the circumstances. Paradoxically, when she first visits Dr Gordon, she finds his place is really comforting and safe. She realises it is because the room has no windows. Esther claims that she can only feel the sense of peace when there is something around her, something that can hide her from the curious glances and prying eyes of others. In the middle of the story, after her first real downfall and her unsuccessful attempts to achieve her goals, the glass jar begins to descend further and Esther gets completely covered by it. She has the feeling that she is inside of a jar where there is no air and no real people. Everyone is a shadow, a motionless figure, and she feels the pressure to abandon her real self. There is still something around her, but it no longer hides her – she is no longer transparent and no longer an observer. She is the spectacle.

As the bell jar transforms Esther’s surroundings, so does her vision. She is constantly frightened by her own reflection, because she often fails to recognise her own features. After the night with Doreen and Lenny, when she is on her way back to her hotel room, she suddenly sees her reflection in the lift door and describes it as a “(...) big, smudgy-eyes Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face” (Plath 1996, 17). She realises in horror “It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked” (Plath 1996, 17).

At the beginning of her stay at Dr Gordon’s private sanatorium, she sees the people around her immobile: “Then my gaze slid over the people to the blaze of green beyond the diaphanous curtains, and I felt as if I were sitting in the window of an enormous department store. The figures around me weren’t people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life” (Plath 1996, 136). Esther begins to feel that she is one of them, that she has become a puppet, that she is no longer part of real life: “To the person in *The Bell Jar*, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream. A bad dream” (Plath 1996, 227).

After Dr Gordon’s first shock-therapies, Esther becomes increasingly aware of the growing power of the depression that surrounds her. When she tries to kill herself by taking her mother’s pills, she wakes up surrounded by darkness. For a moment - which feels like an eternity - she is certain she has gone blind. A few days later, however, she begins to see patches and, to be sure, asks for a mirror.

But when she sees her face in the mirror, she freezes: "At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture" (Plath 1996, 168). Her bruised and brightly discoloured face misleads her, not revealing whether it belongs to a man or a woman.

The glass is lifted a little only after the first electric shock treatment at Dr Nolan's sanatorium. It is like waking from a deep and dreamless sleep: "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 the circulating air" (Plath 1996, 206). Esther starts to breathe freely again. Her appetite returns, she is able to be happy for a little while.

However, she cannot forget and she is still not completely free. Esther remembers and asks: "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (Plath 1996, 227). She understands that this situation still needs to be addressed, and she is not the only one who struggles with it. Women all over the world see themselves in a mirror that shows them an entirely different reflection. Wearing a mask is still not something that is left behind.

## Masks and double personalities

It is crucial to examine what wearing a mask really means to Esther Greenwood. As a mask, she often uses an alias, 'Elly Higginbottom from Chicago', whenever she gets into a crucial situation. As a mask, she lies to people about her intentions; she makes up stories – using her imagination from other people's experiences. It is almost necessary for her to wear a mask that helps her to be more or less a new woman – it gives her a new identity. It is the identity of a person who she really is, but does not know how to show it to those around her. This mask can be useful, sometimes even lifesaving up to a certain extent. What she does not know is that this shield is inexorably changing her. On the one hand, it strengthens her to be tendentious and adventurous. It consumes her true identity, not allowing her to live while feeling its constant presence, which eventually leads to her not being able to make decisions without thinking of herself as another person. Soon, her depression begins to materialise in her everyday life. She is unable to sleep, read, write or think. Her mind is full of images of suicide attempts. At the time she tries to kill herself for the first time, she has not slept for twenty-one nights. She starts to lose control.

Esther meets Joan for the first time at the Caplan sanatorium. What really stands out is the observation that Joan is very much like Esther. As the reader becomes familiar with the stories of these two women – Esther narrating the main storyline and Joan being the heroine of the subplot, it is easy to feel that the story is split between the two of them. Sometimes it feels as if Esther is Joan and vice versa. Their lives are the same, just in two different realities: "Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every

crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose” (Plath 1996, 210).

They switch faces or masks. In the beginning, Joan is the brave one. She is the better version of Esther, the reckless one who was able to do what she was afraid of doing. When she decided to kill herself, she could not, because it was not her body that she wanted to destroy. There was something disgusting inside of her, the inappropriate self that made her an outsider. But Joan could easily hurt herself: “Joan grinned sheepishly and stretched out her hands, palm up. Like a miniature mountain range, large, reddish weals up-heaved across the white flesh of her wrists” (Plath 1996, 192). Joan is always one step ahead of Esther. When she finally gets into Belsize, Joan is already there. This makes her doubt in herself. Joan becomes the exemplar for her – the ideal she must reach in order to be free again, the perfect image she can never reach. Esther sums this up when she describes Joan as “(...) marking the gulf between me and the nearly well ones” (Plath 1996, 196). She is like a shadow. For Esther “Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me” (Plath 1996, 197).

Joan is the mask Esther always wanted to wear: courageous and brave in her sexuality. Like Esther, Joan had a relationship with Buddy Willard, but Joan is curious about everything. This is Esther’s first encounter with the concept of homosexuality. She finds it hard to imagine “What does a woman see in a woman that she can’t see in a man” (Plath 1996, 210). But this does not mean that she is not interested: “In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me” (Plath 1996, 209). She continues: “Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own” (Plath 1996, 209).

At this point, this particular mask starts to peel: Esther does not let Joan in. Her duality returns to the surface, and this time she chooses marriage and motherhood. Nor can she imagine a life with another woman, because this time she would have to sacrifice her career. And again, we meet the image of the fig tree. Once again, Esther sits under the fig tree, starving because she cannot choose between the fruits, and so every available fig withers, just like her hopes and dreams. So many possibilities, so many choices, but life is too short.

Eventually, she chooses to reject the life that Joan has led, and by doing so, she begins to distance herself from the similarities they once shared. As Esther begins to feel better and healthier, it is Joan who becomes a shadow of herself. In a way, this is a necessary consequence. Esther has to destroy this part of her that was once again, just a mask. And for her, in some way, that is Joan. Nothing reflects this more clearly than her beating heart at Joan’s funeral, beating the rhythm: “I am, I am, I am” (Plath 1996, 233). Or is it just the sound of a fig falling to the ground?

## Conclusion

The paper provided a comprehensive analysis of the life of Sylvia Plath and her most famous novel, *The Bell Jar*. The main aim was to prove that *The Bell Jar* is not

just a fictional story, it is rather a stage in Plath's life, narrated by her self-created character. Plath embodied the expectations of the 1950s, but that was only the surface. As highlighted in this paper, biographers have noted that this kind of duality was quite common in the period. Women presented a very different face to the public and only acted as themselves to their closest friends and family members – in some cases not even in front of them. It was much more common for a woman not to reveal her 'real' identity to anyone at all.

Sylvia Plath is a great example of this phenomenon. According to her diaries and letters, no one could really know who she really was. As women had to wear these masks all the time, in the end even they could not distinguish between their real and false selves. Their failure to be and to know their true identity ended up in a paradoxical situation. As the line between the real and the false identity becomes increasingly blurred, a new persona comes to life. It may have such a huge effect on the person that they actually feel that this projection is flesh and blood. Joan, a character in *The Bell Jar*, also functioned as a mirror. She showed Esther the part of herself that she always wanted to be. Joan exists as the real self; she is the brave, the reckless one, the personality that Esther deeply wants to own, while still acting the way society expects her to act. Joan is her true self, while Esther is the mask shown to the public.

This shadowy mask – madness itself – followed Esther throughout the story, as was the case for Plath and many women in the 1950s. The mask they wore daily could not be easily removed, and so it became part of their identity. For Esther, suicidal thoughts were the 'end product' of overwhelming depression, acting almost as another way out, but she had to realise that no matter how hard she tries, she would never be able to hide from the gaze of society.

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