



University of
Stavanger

Department of Cultural Studies and Languages

BACHELOR THESIS

Study program:

English language and literature - bachelor

Spring semester 2024

Author: Martine Høiland

Supervisor: Janne Stigen Drangsholt

Title of bachelor thesis:

Å Bli Sittende Fast i et Klokkeglass: Kvinnelig Frihet i Sylvia Plaths *The Bell Jar*

English title:

To Be Stuck in a Bell Jar: Female Freedom in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Word count: 6040

Abstract

The core of this thesis is a close reading of the novel *The Bell Jar* written by Sylvia Plath and published in 1963 under the pseudonym “Victoria Lucas”, with a particular focus on the topic of female freedom and how it is faced by the novel’s protagonist Esther Greenwood. The novel takes place in 1950s America where societies restrictive views and norms lead to a loss of freedom for Esther at various times. The thesis is focused mainly on quotations from specific scenes within the novel as they portray the restrictive society upon which the novel is based. To expand my analysis, I will use quotations from various sections of Betty Friedan’s study *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In the novel, Esther Greenwood experiences and observes both gains and losses of female freedom, particularly on the topic of sex and marriage, which will be discussed in depth primarily in the context of Esther’s encounters with male characters, such as Buddy, Marco, Constantin, and Irwin. Such encounters are seen to signify some of the conflicts faced by women in the 50s, on their quest towards freedom. Esther is at a point in her life where she must decide whether to abide by societies norms or to contravene. Esther also experiences impactful encounters with female characters, such as Doreen and Mrs. Willard. The thesis also contains an exploration of the challenges involved in being an unmarried but sexually active woman, which automatically puts one outside the dominant ideology of 1950s USA.

Table of Contents

1. <u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>4</u>
2. <u>THE PROBLEM THAT HAS NO NAME</u>	<u>4</u>
3. <u>THE NIGHTS OUT WITH DOREEN</u>	<u>6</u>
3.1 <u>THE ATTEMPTED RAPE</u>	<u>7</u>
4. <u>THE WILLARDS</u>	<u>9</u>
5. <u>THE DATE WITH CONSTANTIN</u>	<u>10</u>
5.1 <u>THE FIG TREE</u>	<u>11</u>
6. <u>THE NIGHT WITH IRWIN</u>	<u>12</u>
7. <u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>14</u>
8. <u>WORKS CITED</u>	<u>15</u>

1. Introduction

The Bell Jar is a novel written by Sylvia Plath and published in 1963 as her only novel amongst many poems. Plath famously decided to end her own life mere weeks after the novel's publication in England under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas". The novel's semi-autobiographical nature is the reasoning for the pseudonym being used as Plath was afraid that some people would figure out that some characters were modeled after them. *The Bell Jar* details the struggles of a 20-year-old woman in 1950s America as Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist, finds herself having to make difficult decisions that could impact the rest of her life. The novel revolves around Esther's summer in New York while working an internship at a fashion magazine, and eventually her descent into madness as a rejection from a Harvard University fiction-writing class seems to be the final straw causing her breakdown and suicide attempt. As Esther is of average age for women to marry, she is furthermore forced to decide whether to live an unmarried or married life, while outside forces try to influence her view on her own sexuality and purity. In this thesis I will show how female freedom is portrayed in the novel with a particular focus on the topic of sex and marriage. This close reading will concentrate on quotations from impactful scenes such as Esther's nights out with Doreen, the observations and views of Mrs. Willard, the date with the interpreter Constantin, and the night spent with mathematics professor Irwin. The portrayal of female freedom will also be shown through metaphors, some created by Esther, and some by others.

2. The problem that has no name

Marriage is a topic which brings forth anxiety and conflict within Esther's mind as she is at the age where she must decide whether to abide by the gender roles of 1950s USA, or whether to go against the dominant ideology. A section of the study *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan called "The Problem That Has No Name" touches on how the 1950s were a time when the USA seemed to return to the domestic ideals that were prevalent in the 19th century and earlier. Here, Friedan points to how Americans

were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets, physicists, or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities the old-fashioned feminists fought for (Friedan 16)

The time in which the novel takes place was a time where the average age for women to marry was 20, Esther is 19 and 20 years old in the novel, making her concerns about marriage warranted. She is at a point in her life where she should be deciding whether she wants to get married or not. Young women were so set on getting married that they would drop out of college or avoid college altogether, as there was no use of an education if you were a housewife. By the middle of the 1950s, 60% of women were dropping out of college to get married or because too much education would be deemed not feminine. All the women that had fought for women's rights to a higher education earlier did it seemingly for nothing as young women did not want an education anymore, many went to college simply to put themselves in a position where they could meet their future husband (Friedan 16). Esther confirms these ideas as she details that some of the guests at the women only hotel in New York where she was living for the summer were girls who "had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (Plath 4). These women have educations, yet they do not plan to spend their life working, instead they plan on getting married and becoming housewives.

Throughout the novel the thought of purity, virginity, and sex are matters which Esther fixates on and battles with: "I saw the world divided into people who had slept with someone and people who hadn't, this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and the other" (Plath 77). Esther divides people into groups based on if they are a virgin or not, and she herself goes back and forth on being a proud virgin and feeling like her virginity is a burden she wishes to rid herself of. As the novel progresses one notices all the different views on sex that Esther encounters through other characters outlooks and actions and how they affect her.

One of these encounters is with Esther's mother, who cuts out an article and mails it to her at college with the title "In Defense of Chastity" (Plath 76). This article states that even if men are not pure in the sexual sense, it is still vital for them that the woman they marry is pure and virginal. This article also claims that men try to persuade women into sex as a way of tricking them, giving the women the idea that the pair would marry later. If the woman gives in to premarital sex, then the men that did the persuading would lose all respect for her and she would be deemed not marriageable. This article shows a double standard that was prevalent in 1950s USA where purity and sexual rejection was associated with femininity while sexual persuasion was associated with masculinity. We see this in Lily Kip's "De-Centering the

Bildungsroman: Identification, Trauma, and the Female Double in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*", where it is stated that

the media began to perpetuate a narrative of male "sexual aggression" and coercion as necessary for the "masculinity and matrimonial success" of America's young white men (31). At the same time, young women were expected to remain steadfast against the advances of their male partners to protect the requisite purity of white female gender norms (Kip 22).

In this quotation the idea of coercion as a part of 50s dating culture is once again prevalent, with the men doing the persuading. Women were expected to not fall for the coercion that they experienced at the hands of men, as this could make them an undesirable wife. Men are allowed and expected to be sexual before marriage, but if a woman would be the same that would impact her probability for marriage. Esther is aware of this double standard and lack of female regard as she states, "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" (Plath 77). Esther is critical of the double standard that was prevalent in society where women must be pure to be seen as worthy of marriage while men were not expected to follow the same standard.

3. The nights out with Doreen

To be a sexually free woman in the 50s was to be a deviant who goes against the importance of female purity in the realm of dating and marriage. A night out with her friend from the internship, Doreen, lets Esther get a glimpse into the life of those who are sexually free, which bothers her. While in the taxi on their way to a party with the Ladies' Day magazine, the pair get invited to a bar by the disc jockey Lenny Shepherd and his friend Frankie. After having some drinks at the bar, Doreen, Lenny, and Esther end up going to Lenny's apartment together. Esther leaves the apartment after things get heated between Doreen and Lenny as they start play fighting to the point where Doreen's breasts fall out of her dress like "full brown melons" (Plath 16). Upon returning to her hotel room Esther draws herself a scolding hot bath, which is a sort of mediative ritual for her. When meditating in the bath she visualizes Doreen and Lenny dissolving and becoming someone she does not know as a way of distancing herself from them. After her bath and meditation, she feels "pure and sweet as a new baby" (Plath 19). Having these thoughts as a part of her "purification process" suggests that after that night she does not view the pair as pure because of their sexuality, which greatly differs from hers.

After her night with Doreen and Lenny, Esther disregards Doreen both psychically and mentally as a way of distancing herself from what she views as impure. In “The Mother, the Self and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Takahashi Takako’s *Congruent Figure*” Yōko Sakane states that

Esther feels alienated not simply by Doreen and Lenny but, more importantly, from her own sexuality. And once she finds herself unable to identify completely with the sexual Doreen, Esther – who now represents asexuality – tries to disregard Doreen totally (Sakane 32)

Esther psychically disregards Doreen when she comes home from the night at Lenny’s apartment seeming quite drunk as she is knocking on Esther’s door fumbling her words. Esther decides to not let Doreen into her room as she claims that she will never get rid of her if she does so. Instead, she lets Doreen sleep outside of her door in the pool of vomit she produced. Esther doesn’t seem to feel any responsibility when it comes to her drunk friend as the image of inebriated Doreen sleeping in a pool of her own vomit matches the impure and dirty portrayal she is given by Esther. “Deep down I would have nothing to do with her. Deep down I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart” (Plath 21). In this quotation Esther disregards Doreen mentally, they go from being friends to Esther thinking that she will have nothing to do with Doreen from this point forward. She rather chooses to identify herself with Betsy, a sweet and innocent southern girl who is also an intern at the Ladies’ Day magazine. Doreen’s rejection of societies expectations of female purity is something which Esther is not comfortable with, again signaling Esther’s felt influence on what society deems right and wrong. As will be discussed however, this will change as the novel progresses and Esther finds herself acting similarly to Doreen.

3.1 The attempted rape

A rape is an action that can take away someone’s freedom in various way, psychical and sexual freedom is taken as an act is performed on their body without their permission, psychological freedom is taken as they lose the ability to think clearly on the act itself. When at a dance at a country club Esther meets a man who finds numerous ways to take away her freedom. Esther and Doreen meet her boyfriend Lenny and a man named Marco at the dance. Marco quickly shows his violent side as right after meeting Esther he grabs her upper arm hard enough for purple prints to form where his fingers were. When it comes to Marco, Esther

seems to lose the ability to make her own decisions, as her refusing to dance three times doesn't stop him from grabbing her drink and tossing it out, then grabbing her hand and dragging her to the dancefloor. "Then Marco gripped my hand in such a way I had to choose between following him on to the floor or having my arm torn off" (Plath 102). Marco seems unable to touch Esther in a regular and gentle way and doesn't respect her wishes. There is a loss of freedom where she is not given a choice to refuse to follow him to the dancefloor, which he makes sure of as he grabs her with such force.

There is also a loss of psychical and sexual freedom experienced by Esther at the hands of Marco. Seemingly out of nowhere, in the middle of the pair's conversation about him being in love with his cousin whom he cannot be with as she is his first cousin and is becoming a nun, Marco pushes Esther to the ground. As she tries pulling herself up, Esther finds herself being pushed down by Marco's once again. He jumps on top of her as she lays on the ground, leading to her thinking "it's happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen" (Plath 104). Esther is preparing herself for the fact that she is about to be raped, she does not need to use the word for it to be understood what is about to occur. The violence and image of Marco on top of Esther is enough for the reader to understand what the "it" is. He uses his teeth to rip the shoulder strap on her dress exposing her naked skin down to her waist and repeatedly calls her a slut. Her body's response in this situation is to fight as she digs the heel of her shoe into his leg and uses his distracted state as an opportunity to land a punch on his nose. Marco sits up after the punch, giving Esther the chance to escape, who weeps while searching for Doreen.

If Esther never had the ability to fight back, one can imagine what could have happened between them. Her freedom is taken away by him, yet she is able to reclaim some of it by fighting back, claiming control over a situation which could've gone much worse. The psychical effect of the situation is prevalent as Esther is walking around covered in mud and grass with her stole covering her otherwise exposed breasts. When she returns to the hotel, one can see the mental toll that this traumatic event has had on her as she goes to the roof and feeds her entire wardrobe to the night wind. As stated by April Pelt in "Esther's Sartorial Selves: Fashioning a Feminine Identity in *The Bell Jar*"

Esther climbs to the roof deck and "feeds" her wardrobe "piece by piece to the night wind" (111). Just as she washes away her feeling of "dirtiness" in a hot bath after watching Lenny and Doreen's flirtation earlier in the summer, Esther attempts to purge herself of the "dirtiness" born of Marco's attempted rape by ritually casting

away the “queerly cut forty-dollar” dresses that have utterly failed to transform her into the smart, confident, alluring young woman she wanted to become in New York (Pelt 17)

As Pelt suggests here, the discarding of the clothing can be a sort of meditative ritual for Esther in the same way the bath from the night with Doreen and Lenny is. By ridding herself of all her clothing she rids herself of the girl who spent her summer working an internship at a fashion magazine in New York, as clothing has been important for her up to this point in the novel. As Esther leaves New York and returns to her hometown the following day, she borrows a blouse and skirt from Betsy. As Betsy has been portrayed as a virginal and innocent sweetheart, wearing her clothing may be another way to get rid of the dirty feeling Esther may be experiencing after the encounter with Marco. Pelt states in her article that Esther returning home in the “guise of the all-American ‘good’ girl” suggests that a part of her believes that the provocative dress she borrowed from Doreen that night is partially to blame for the attempted rape, which fits with the portrayal of Doreen (Pelt 18).

4. The Willards

The norms of 50s society seemingly became so solid because of all those who made sure to spread their traditional values to the younger generation. Mrs. Willard, Buddy Willard’s mother seems to be a major influence on Esther’s view on married life. Mrs. Willard has some quite traditional views which she shares with her son Buddy, who then shares said views with Esther. One of the wisdoms is the metaphor “what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (Plath 67). This quote suggests that women were mere steppingstones for men, they were meant to simply guide men to their accomplishments, not acquire their own. Later, Esther rejects this metaphor about marriage as she states

the last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be a place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket (Plath 79)

Esther does not want to be submissive and passive because she is a woman, instead she wishes to be powerful and active. She has dreams she wishes to achieve, like becoming a poet. Such dreams cannot be accomplished if she allows herself to be restricted by a society

that only wants her to focus on what the men in her life want. The dull metaphor detailing a life where one only focuses on you partners accomplishments and dreams is turned into a more colorful metaphor where one can “shoot off in all directions”, essentially do whatever you wish, which one usually cannot do when in a traditional restrictive 50s marriage.

Mrs. Willard affects Esther’s view on marriage not only in terms of what she says, but by observations Esther has made about her life. Esther details observing Mrs. Willard as she spent weeks braiding a rug made of wool from Mr. Willard’s old suits. After spending all that time and effort making this rug, Mrs. Willard would go on to use it as a kitchen mat, which led to it having a dull and soiled appearance only after a few days:

And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat (Plath 80)

Esther portrays her critical view on love and marriage in this quotation. She claims that never mind how a man tries to court a woman with romantic acts like giving roses, kisses, and restaurant dinners, none of it matters in the end. Esther believes that all men secretly want is to “step on” the woman they marry. The image of a woman being stepped on by their husband is an image of a husband asserting dominance over his wife. The woven rug is turned into a metaphor for how Esther believed husbands would treat their wives at this time, as nothing more than a kitchen mat for them to step on.

Esther is given the opportunity for a comfortable life financially and domestically as future doctor Buddy Willard proposes to her. Esther does not want the life of a housewife, and when proposed to by Buddy, she simply declines his offer and says that she will never get married (Plath 88). As Buddy is a man with quite traditional views, learned through his mother, he calls Esther crazy for saying that she will never get married and appears sure that she will change her mind. In the end he does not seem to believe her rejection of marriage as he states when visiting her at the mental hospital “I wonder who you’ll marry now, Esther” (Plath 230). Societal norms are strong to the point where one would be labeled as crazy and unbelievable for defying them.

Deciding to live a non-married life in the 1950s was irregular as this choice automatically puts one outside of societies ideology of marriage and family. Esther also seeks out sexual activity outside of wedlock with both Constantin and Irwin, which again places her

outside of the dominant ideology of the time, by being an impure woman in the eyes of society. As she is resistant to the thought of marriage and interested in premarital intercourse, one could say she is not acting upon what would make her the most desirable wife in society's eyes.

5. The date with Constantin

Society's restrictive nature is plaguing Esther as she seeks to break free from the restraints put on the American woman of 1950s. When on a date, Esther decides that she will let herself be seduced that night thinking she will finally lose the virginity which by this time has grown to burden her so much. Esther goes on a date with an interpreter named Constantin after the pair were introduced by Mrs. Willard. They go to the U.N., before having dinner together. Afterwards he invites her to his apartment. Esther reflects that "[m]y mother had told me to never under any circumstances to go with a man to a man's room after an evening out, it could only mean one thing" (Plath 76). Regardless of the warning from her mother, Esther sees this invitation as an opportunity rather than something to shun. She wishes to do what her mother wants her to avoid, which is to have sex outside wedlock. The pair talk and listen to records on the balcony for an hour while holding hands. Esther is becoming impatient as she is waiting for Constantin to make his move on her, which he never does. "I thought if only I had a keen, shapely bone-structure to my face or could discuss politics shrewdly or was a famous writer Constantin might find me interesting enough to sleep with" (Plath 78). In Esther's mind, him not seducing her can only be explained by her not being interesting enough for him. Having thoughts such as those in the quotation show that Esther is feeling insecure because of Constantin's lack of sexual interest for her. As I have previously discussed, the 50s were a time where there were placed a lot of emphasis on women's desirability, to not be wanted by a man could be seen as failing as a woman. By having sex before marriage, Esther would put herself in a position where she is not deemed a desirable wife in the eyes of society, but this might be exactly what she wants. In a section of Freidan's study called "The Sex-Directed Educators" she states

The discussion on premarital intercourse usually leads to the scientific conclusion that it is wrong. One professor builds up his case against sexual intercourse before marriage with statistics chosen to demonstrate that premarital sexual experience tends to make marital adjustment more difficult (Freidan 161)

A professor teaches his students that to have sex before marriage is scientifically proven to make marriage more difficult. This same idea is also described in the article Esther receives from her mother; one can therefore assume that she is perfectly aware of the repercussions premarital sexual activity can have on her probability for marriage. Esther claims several times throughout the novel that she does not want to get married so there is no point in her acting upon what would make her the most desirable candidate for marriage. Seeking out sex with a stranger may be Esther's way of breaking free from what society expects of her as a woman.

When waking up after falling asleep in Constantin's bed with him next to her, Esther starts imagining what her life would be like if the pair were to be wed. This fantasy includes her waking up at seven to cook Constantin an elaborate breakfast... After he leaves for work, she would be left washing up all the dirty dishes from breakfast before she had to cook again. This time it was an extravagant dinner which would be ready for his arrival home from work. This would again leave her with more dishes that needed to be washed in the evening "till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted" (Plath 80). Life as a housewife is not appealing to Esther as her fantasy only includes labor, all she thinks marriage is for women is toil. When fantasizing about married life many think of all the love and comfort between oneself and one's partner, but it seems that Esther's anxieties do not allow her to view marriage in such a way. As I have already established, Esther's concerns about marriage come from firsthand observation in the Willards' home. She claims, "cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night" (Plath 80). The fantasy of married life with Constantin seems to be based on the life of Mrs. Willard as she has observed her enough to see that all she does all day is cook and clean. Esther never details observing a home with a married couple where the woman is not a housewife performing wifely duties all day, which to her reinforces the idea that this is simply what life is like as a married woman.

5.1 The fig tree

As we have seen, Esther struggles with the constrictive nature of the society she is a part of where a woman can only choose one direction for her life to take, instead of combining and experiencing all that she wants. During the date with Constantin at the U.N. building Esther starts imagining her life as a metaphorical fig tree branching out before her very eyes. Each fig in this tree represents a direction in life, one fig is a husband and happy home, another fig is a famous poet and one a brilliant professor. One fig is traveling the world, and another is having many lovers. As Esther feels herself sitting at the bottom of this tree, she sees that

above her there are so many figs to the point where she cannot make out all of them, so many directions her life could take. She is only allowed to choose one of these figs, she cannot decide which fig to choose, paralyzed by her own indecision she begins starving to death. The figs begin rotting and falling off the tree, and the opportunities disappearing.

In the society that Esther finds herself in, the figs representing careers such as poet or professor are contradictory to the fig about a husband and happy home as it was highly unusual for women who were married to be doing something other than housewife duties. This is her own fantasy, yet Esther knows that society only allows her to pick one of these figs, a woman could not be working, well-traveled, and sexually experienced all while having a happy husband and home. (Plath 73). In this metaphor of the fig tree there is an illusion of choice, Esther seems to believe that she has the freedom to decide exactly what she wants to be, but that is only true to a certain point. As Freidan states “a woman is what society says she is” (Freidan, 126). Esther can only control what she views herself as and what she identifies herself with, not what society views her as. By choosing to be a professor or poet she could be viewed as simply unmarried by society. If she were to have many lovers’ society would view her as promiscuous. By choosing anything other than the fig that represents a happy husband and home she would be labeled as a deviant who goes against the dominant ideology of society.

6. The night with Irwin

By seeking out premarital sex, Esther decides that she does not care about being deemed a desirable wife in society’s eyes. She has some requirements for the man she will lose her virginity to, which is a way for her to claim power over the situation. She decides that the man must be intelligent, sexually experienced, and someone she doesn’t know now and won’t know in the future, she wants the man to simply take her virginity, and then to never see him again (Plath 218). “It was only after seeing Irwin’s study that I decided to seduce him” (Plath 216). During the date with Constantin earlier in the novel Esther decides that she will let Constantin seduce her. Nothing ever happens between the pair, to her disappointment, as he shows no indication of wishing to have sex with her that night. This can explain why Esther takes control over the situation with Irwin and decides to seduce him instead of waiting for him to do it. What ultimately drives Esther in this situation is her seeing that there is no way her plan to seduce this man could fail as he seems sexually experienced when it comes to casual encounters, which is exactly what Esther wants. In a section of Freidan’s study named

“The Sex-Seekers” she details interviewing young girls who were seen as sexually promiscuous which led her to the following conclusion

They have not even begun to experience a sexual response, much less "fulfillment." They use sex-pseudo-sex to erase their lack of identity; it seldom matters who the boy is; the girl almost literally does not "see" him when she has yet no sense of herself (Friedan, 265)

The situation described in this quotation can be applied to what Esther is experiencing. As the underlying theme of the entire novel is Esther's search for identity one can say that she has no sense of herself. As previously stated, Esther has a few requirements for the boy she will lose her virginity to, but it does not seem to matter who the boy is as long as he fills these obligations. One is never given the impression that Esther seeks out sex for the pleasure and intimacy one can experience through such acts, there is no fulfillment involved in that sense. As stated earlier, Esther sees the world divided into two groups, the virgins and those who have had sex, and by seeking out sex Esther switches from being identified with one group to another. Esther wants to be identified with the people that have sex, which she accomplishes in the end.

Esther's prior feelings of control in the situation, will soon fade. He buys her numerous cups of coffee and takes her to a French restaurant, things he possibly would not have done if he didn't believe that there was a slight chance that the pair would have sex. Their romantic day with coffee and dinner fits into Esther's earlier idea about men performing plentiful romantic gestures for women, only to assert dominance over them when given the chance. Esther and Irwin have sex as soon as they return to his apartment after having dinner. It seems during their sexual encounter that he is the one with the power, not her. Esther tells him that she is a virgin, and he doesn't seem to either believe her or care enough to take some precaution as she experiences "startingly bad pain" (Plath 218). Esther tells Irwin that she is experiencing pain, but he just reassures her that sometimes it hurts and keeps going instead of being alarmed by her feelings of pain. After he climaxes, he leaves Esther alone in a state where she feels unsettled and unsure if she is still a virgin or not. After seeing the blood pouring out of her crotch, she tells Irwin that she is bleeding in a rather panicked state, and he just reassures her and says that bleeding often happens and that she will be all right (Plath 219). Her clear ignorance in this situation can possibly be blamed by a lack of sexual education as she was simply taught to avoid it. It is likely that there was not an extensive

sexual education in the schools that Esther attended throughout her life as such acts were reserved for husbands and wives, at least according to the norms of 50s society.

In this situation the power she once felt is taken from Esther as she is so unknowledgeable about sex, while Irwin has a lot of experience and therefore more knowledge, giving him the power in that setting. If Esther had known that sex is not supposed to hurt to this extent, she would possibly have stopped the act before it went any further. If she had known that such copious amounts of blood can be a telltale sign that she is hemorrhaging, she could have dealt with her injury differently. Instead, she chooses to believe what Irwin tells her as she does not know any better herself, and possibly thinking that he is knowledgeable on the topic due to his experience. Knowledge is power in this instance. Later when back at the hospital Esther is temporarily being treated at, she calls Irwin to discuss the bills she got from the hospital after her hemorrhage. Irwin agrees to pay the bill and goes on to ask Esther when he will be seeing her again, she uses this opportunity to regain some power in their relation as she simply responds “never” and hangs up the phone (Plath 231). This seems quite a relief for Esther as his voice meant nothing to her and she knows he will not be able to get ahold of her, he knows nothing about her in the end. She details “I was perfectly free” (Plath 232). She had accomplished what she wanted, which was to lose her virginity and then never see that person again.

7. Conclusion

By looking at different scenes, metaphors, and quotations from the novel it is clear that Esther is both affected and plagued by the restrictive society she is a part of, while she mostly rejects the idea it consists of. Esther first views Doreen and Lenny as impure to the point where she needs to cleanse and rid herself of the pair because of their sexuality. At this point she may be impacted by the traditional views on female purity that are fed to her through life. At college such values are fed to her through a magazine article sent to her by her mother which details how women should strive to be virginal while men were not set to the same standard. Later, Esther begins viewing her own virginity as a burden she must rid herself of as she tries to break free from society’s restrictive nature when it comes to female sexuality. By seeking out extra-marital sex, Esther goes against the dominant ideology of the time which focused so much on the importance of female purity to be deemed a desirable wife. There is a psychological and sexual loss of freedom at the hands of Marco who puts Esther in a situation where she must fight to get this man off her to avoid being raped, leaving her with both psychological and mental scars. On the topic of marriage, most of Esther’s views on the matter seem to come

from Mrs. Willard both through her metaphor which places emphasis on the men having power over and leading women, and through the observations Esther makes about her life as a housewife. Being a housewife seems an uncreative and tiresome life to Esther, who does not want to stay home while cooking and cleaning all day while having her decisions be made by a husband.

Esther is bound by and therefore critical of the power imbalance between the sexes that was so prevalent in 50s societies, a society where the norm was for a woman to strive to be a desirable wife, only to be inferior to her husband. Esther is also aware of how limiting society is for women, the fantasy of the fig tree demonstrates the restrictions in women's choices about their own life. In a less restrictive society she could possibly have more control over what she is labeled as by society, and a female professor or poet could be seen as her accomplishments instead of her lack of husband. Clearly, there are numerous instances where Esther experiences a loss of freedom in the novel, but there are also several examples of Esther gaining freedom that was previously lost. She does so by fighting off Marco, rejecting Irwin's wishes to see her again after their encounter, and by generally going against the traditional values that afflicted the 50s society, specifically those focused on female purity and the importance of marriage.

8. Works cited

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, W. W. Norton & Company INC, New York, 1963.

<https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/FeminineMystique.pdf>.

Pelt, April. "Esther's Sartorial Selves: Fashioning a Feminine Identity in *The Bell Jar*." *Plath Profiles: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Sylvia Plath Studies* 8 (2015): 13.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Faber & Faber, 2019.

Kip, Lily, "De-Centering the Bildungsroman: Identification, Trauma, and the Female Double in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*" (2019). Honors Theses. 303.

<https://scarab.bates.edu/honorstheses/303>

Sakane, Yōko. "The Mother, the Self, and the Other: The Search for Identity in Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar' and Takahashi Takako's 'Congruent Figure.'" *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 14, 1998, pp. 27–48. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772124>.