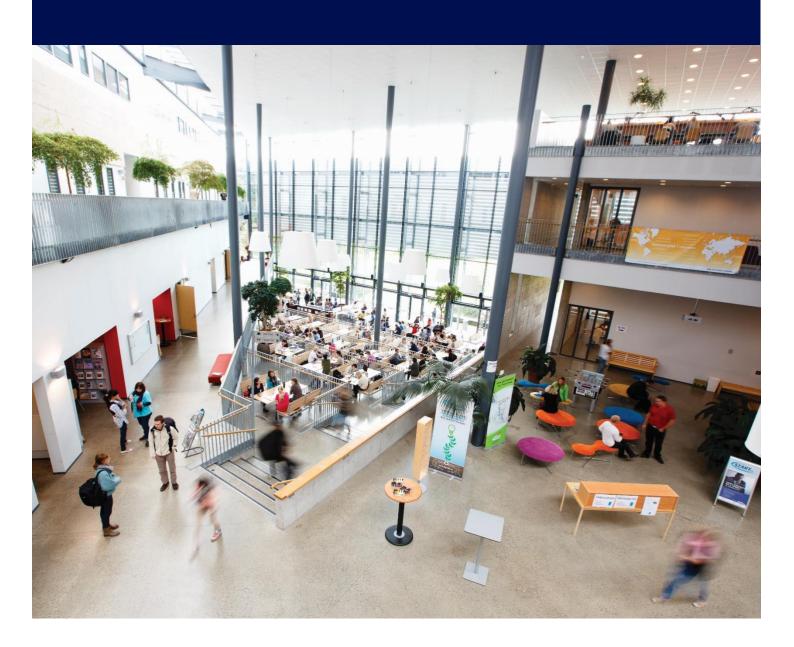**TUVA FJØRTOFT STORSTRØM**
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Deconstructing Discourses: Mental Health in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath has captivated both critics and leisure readers since its publication in 1963 until present day, affirming its place as a classic of American literature. Given its wide and varied reception, the novel has evoked a diverse array of scholarly interpretations. Among these readings, several acclaimed Plath scholars have underscored the novel's representation of mental health as significant. In accordance, I posit that the novel's unique portrayal of mental health is utmost captivating and crucial, contributing to its enduring relevance. The aim of this thesis is to investigate the representation of mental health, specifically depression, within *The Bell Jar*. Furthermore, to delve into the implications of this representation and its significance.

First and foremost, this thesis examines the portrayal of mental health through the lens of Esther Greenwood, the protagonist and sole narrator of the novel. Esther, a young woman in the mid-twentieth century, grapples with her mental health and finding her place in the world. This thesis argues how she is entrapped in a bell jar, depicting both her prison as depressed, as well as the societal and cultural constraints constructed by her surroundings. Esther's distinct narration style and usage of figurative language function to depict a raw and weighty representation of mental health and society.

To frame this exploration, the thesis begins by engaging with the connection of depression and narrative, with a particular focus on the female experience, drawing valuable insights from essays assembled in Hilary Clark's *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark* (2008) and Tina Stern's theories on 'border narratives'. Furthermore, it incorporates the theories of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Sarah Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). These seminal works, spanning from different time periods, each problematize the ramifications of societal and cultural frameworks. The emphasized 'truths' of society have wielded and continue to wield great influence, shaping not only our perceptions but also the very way we mold our identities and landscapes. By utilizing a contemporaneous work to Plath's novel, as well as a more recent publication, this thesis wishes to underscore the lasting importance of *The Bell Jar* and reflections on the interplay of the individual, mental health, and society.

The first main chapter of this thesis examines Esther's narration style, which functions to offer readers a unique and unfiltered portrayal of mental struggles. This serves to enhance

the following engagement with Esther's narrative. In the second and third main chapters, the metaphor of the bell jar is utilized. Firstly, it is examined as a representation of a 'border narrative', symbolizing individual mental health anguish, as well as depicting societal and cultural pressures. Secondly, this thesis aims to 'break' the bell jar, uncovering valuable insights from Esther's portrayal of mental health and emphasizing the significance of textual representation. This thesis endeavors to 'deconstruct discourses' - both within the novel itself and in society at large. By dissecting Esther's narration and her titular metaphor, it connects valuable perspectives which resonate deeply in our society, where millions grapple with mental health challenges and are affected by the constraining discourses that persist.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.

I am, I am, I am (Plath 233).

The inception of my thesis was sparked during the summer of 2020, as I found myself immersed in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) while reading on the beach. Completely captivated by the book, I finished it in one sitting, and it swiftly became my favorite book. When the time came to choose a subject for my thesis, there was no question – I was compelled to delve into the depths of this literary gem. Plath's work introduced me to a protagonist unlike any I had encountered before: Esther Greenwood, whose narrative resonated deeply with me. Her struggles with mental health and society were depicted with an honesty and complexity that struck a chord with me, prompting profound reflections. Esther's affirmation, "I am, I am, I am", serves as a powerful reminder of resilience in the face of adversity – a testament to the enduring human spirit.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath has garnered considerable academic acclaim since its publication in 1963, evoking a diverse array of scholarly interpretations. Considered a classic work of American literature, the novel is deemed a significant text with lasting impact on our discussions of mental health, feminism, and society. Many consider the novel to be an impactful feminist work, others interpret it as a 'bildungsroman', while some view it as a commentary on the post-World War II era. As H. Porter Abbott claims in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2020): "We have all had the experience of arguing about the *meaning* or *meanings* of a narrative" (73). Regardless of how one wishes to categorize the novel, it stands strong as a classic in the literary canon, acclaimed by both critics and leisure readers alike. While there are evidently many important discourses to explore in *The Bell Jar,* I argue its most significant and impactful reading lies in its representation of mental health.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of mental health, especially depression, within Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* and to extract valuable insights that emerge from this exploration. Given the complexity and depth of Plath's work, there are numerous intriguing facets to explore within this aim. Specifically, I have chosen to focus on its protagonist, Esther Greenwood, who offers a female perspective rooted in the mid-twentieth century. However, I wish to transcend temporal boundaries and argue for the continued significance of the text. To frame this exploration, the theoretical framework therefore draws

from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), published concurrently with Plath's work, as well as Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), a more recent publication. These works present compelling insights into the ways emphasized narratives and truths influence societal discourses. Societal and cultural frameworks profoundly affect individuals, and each of these texts, in their distinct yet complementary ways, problematize and challenge our perceptions. Additionally, I will engage with theories on depression and narrative, including reflections of gendered implications, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the themes at play.

The main chapters of this thesis will engage with key scholars on Plath's novel, delving into what I contend to be pivotal aspects for my aim. Firstly, I will examine the distinctive narration of Esther Greenwood and its implications for representing mental health. Secondly, I will explore how the titular bell jar metaphor unveils both a depiction of entrapping mental affliction and of societal constraints, reflecting the intricate complexity of mental health. Finally, I will investigate how the bell jar may simultaneously symbolize recovery and offer nuanced perspectives on the process, as well as how the novel may provide a textual community. Mental health is a crucial theme, prevalent in society, yet stigmatized. It is imperative to explore how literature, a formidable tool, can effectively capture its intricacies and provide both insights and support.

1.1. Considerations and Caveats

Before embarking on this thesis and throughout its development, I have engaged in ongoing reflection on my choices and the potential complexities they entail. One primary consideration arises from the decision of exploring mental health through the lens of the protagonist Esther: a young, middle-class, white American woman. By centering this perspective, other viewpoints inevitably recede. While Esther serves as the sole narrator of the novel and thus presents a natural choice for deep investigation, I believe it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations. It is essential to acknowledge the diversity of experiences across demographic groups and how Esther does represent a specific and rather fortunate category. Mental health challenges are prevalent throughout various communities, and it is imperative to not overlook or marginalize other perspectives. For instance, while my thesis emphasizes the female implications of mental health afflictions, I also recognize and advocate for the acknowledgement of men's mental health issues as a significant societal concern as well.

The limitations of Esther's perspective also bring to light the many problematic sentiments present in Path's work. For instance, the novel contains repeated racist remarks that are difficult to reconcile with. While some praise it as a raw and feminist portrayal of female American life in the 1950s, others deeply criticize its toxic attitudes. Furthermore, the criticism often portrays the issue of 'white feminism'. The study "'White supremacy in heels': white feminism, white supremacy, and discursive violence" (2020) explores the implications of how feminism has traditionally centered white women's experiences, producing a sort of 'discursive violence'. Consequently, by improving white women's positionality within a white power structure, women of color and other marginalized groups are overlooked (Moon and Holling 253-254). Similarly, Friedan's respective work has been criticized for catering to middle-class white women. Lionel Shriver, in her introduction to *The Feminine Mystique*, explores the significance in Friedan's theories, but also notes the criticism "for writing about the white, middle- and upper-class women, and excluding the experience of minority women, whose problems might not conform to her model" (np). Furthermore, Ahmed points out in her work that the 'idealized woman' that conjures 'the feminine mystique' is a fantasy unavailable to many black and working-class women, further reinforcing the limitations of its perspective (51). Thus, I would argue Plath's work, containing various problematic elements, requires the need to acknowledge the issues within Esther's narrative and attend to intersectional perspectives.

Finally, there is the matter of Sylvia Plath's legend and the somewhat notorious reputation of her novel. Dealing with undoubtedly dark themes, the novel's introspective and affectively intense narration style has elicited varied reactions from its publication to the present day. Moreover, the semi-autobiographical character of the novel, coupled with Plath's tragic suicide in the same year of its publication, have provoked profound responses. Dedria Bryfonski, in the introduction to *Depression in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* (2012), describes how "Plath's own tragic story quickly overshadowed her literary output" and that "Critics how found it difficult to separate the author from her work" (9). Similarly, a prominent Plath scholar, Linda Wagner-Martin explains how many are drawn to Plath as a 'cult writer', elucidating the notion of "The beautiful and accomplished woman, dead by her own hand" (7). Difficult to disentangle the novel from the author, many find it challenging to interpret Esther's narrative as anything other than the precursor to Plath's tragic end. Moreover, the ensuing responses and reputations have imposed a label on her authorship. Deeply acclaimed, while simultaneously judged as 'over-mythified' and a 'teenage girl icon', Plath stands as one

of the most popular poets, yet a constant subject for academic scrutiny. In "Mad Girls' Love Songs: Two Women Poets—A Professor and Graduate Student—Discuss Sylvia Plath, Angst, and the Poetics of Female Adolescence" (2009), Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver highlight how "Sylvia Plath has a lot to do with this received notion of the teenage girl reader/writer wallowing in self-pity" (180). In essence, Plath's legacy is intertwined with fascination, controversy, and ongoing attention. Her life and works continue to captivate and provoke, leaving behind a complex landscape to navigate.

However, as evidenced in my selection of thesis topic, I assert the pivotal significance of Plath's novel in our discussions on mental health, while also acknowledging its limitations. As asserted initially, the work offers a unique, raw, and profound representation of mental health and societal concerns. Moreover, I recognize the influential and valuable insights in *The Feminine Mystique*, notwithstanding its inherent shortcomings. In agreement, Shriver states: "Still, for all its flaws, *The Feminine Mystique* started a revolution" (np). I would propose that Plath's story or reputation does not detract from engaging with Esther's narrative. In accordance, Wagner-Martin state: "*The Bell Jar* as a novel, however, is meaningful and important as well for readers who know nothing about its author" (7). Furthermore, she argues it presents crucial and influential discourses of feminist, gendered, societal, and cultural character (8-9). While Esther is a woman, Wagner-Martin posits: "the hesitancy and anxiety she feels are universal, and the novel's willingness to tell about those states of mind in a voice that has an undertone of comedy makes the narrative palatable" (7). Recognizing the limitations and shortcomings of perspectives is key for acknowledging the gaps in our ongoing societal discourses. However, I suggest that such recognition should not diminish the value of existing representation we may utilize. Indeed, discerning these limitations may, in fact, yield valuable insights in their own right.

2. Theoretical Lens: Moving Towards Reading *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath has received significant academic recognition since its release, eliciting a wide range of scholarly attention and interpretation. While rooted in its era, it remains pertinent to our present-day. My intention is to delve into its portrayal of mental health and its effects, illuminating its significance from a female perspective, though the lens of its protagonist, Esther Greenwood. To move towards this, my first chapter will be devoted to establishing the theoretical lens that will guide my thesis. This framework will be constructed from prominent theoretical paradigms and acclaimed literary works. Within this chapter, I will first and foremost explain the connection between mental illness, particularly depression, and narrative, aided by essays assembled in Hilary Clark's *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark* (2008) and Tina Stern's "Border Narratives: Three First-Person Accounts of Depression" (2003). Additionally, I will explore the gendered implications of depression and narrative, by looking to Linda M. McCullen's and Kimberley Emmons's respective chapters in Clark's work. Then I will account for key concepts from the seminal texts: *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) by Sarah Ahmed, which will serve as valuable tools for comprehending and interpreting *The Bell Jar.*

2.1. Depression and Narrative

From the contours of private anguish to psychiatric, cultural, and epidemiological accounts, there is an urge to give an account(ing) of depression (Clark 1).

2.1.1. Depression

Depression affects millions upon millions of individuals worldwide at any given time. Linda M. McCullen explains in the introduction to her exploration of narratives and depression, how it is often referred to as the 'common cold' of psychiatric disorders. Although its prevalence may differ from one country to another, it remains one of the most frequently diagnosed conditions in primary healthcare settings globally (127). Tina Stern, in her "Border Narratives: Three First-Person Accounts of Depression" (2003) explains that while our understanding of depression has evolved over time, its presence has been a constant throughout history. She refers to American writer Andrew Solomon, who claims that it "appears that depression has been around as long as man has been capable of self-conscious thought". Moreover, Solomon argues that depression can be understood as "a construction

that changes with the prevailing sociocultural discourse" (91). Stern elucidates that irrespective of how we may choose to define depression - be it attributed to the unconscious, chemical imbalances, religious or moral failings, distorted thinking, or other causes - there persists an ongoing and evolving discourse regarding its nature. Nevertheless, despite theories being subjects to their respective historical and cultural contexts, surprisingly consistent features endure throughout the extensive history of the illness. The condition persists in a recognizable form, whereas its prevalence is increasing (91).

Similarly, in the introduction to *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark* (2008), Hilary Clark highlights the historical and cultural significance of depression. Clark argues that despite its prevalence in our society, depression cannot attain enough visibility. For it remains a condition entangled with stigma, where those inflicted may experience shame and forsake treatment, while our society perpetuates stereotypes and harmful associations - "An anguish added to anguish" (1).

2.1.2. The Connection between Depression and Narrative

We may argue depression and narrative are inevitably intertwined. The term 'narrative', akin to depression, carries vast dimension and complexity. Clark explains how, across a myriad of disciplines, narrative is regarded as crucial to the formation of our identity and culture. Within theoretical frameworks, narrative is widely acknowledged as a fundamental mechanism through which we shape our reality; We construct self-perception and our understanding of the world by narrating our experiences, thereby living out the narrative we create (1-2). However, Clark explains this perspective is contested by scholars who question the overemphasis of narrative, suggesting that not everyone engages the same, whereas some may navigate life with less reliance on narrative frames (2). Nonetheless, within the context of depression, narrative may be argued to hold a crucial connection, and I find the first model of thinking to be coherent. Both Clark and Stern underscore the longstanding tradition of accounting for one's experience of mental anguish, largely due to its capacity to provide meaning in an otherwise perplexing and powerless state of being.

Given the bewildering and distressing nature of one's experience of depression, narration emerges as an empowering tool for seeking meaning. Stern delves into a profound paradox inherent in depression:

(...) though the symptoms associated with depression have been documented for thousands of years, though it has been exhaustively studied, though it is widely experienced and its incidence continues to increase, the most fundamental questions about the very nature of depression remain unanswered (94).

What Stern introduces is how despite depression's extensive history and considerable research, there remains a significant amount of uncertainty surrounding its exact nature. We are faced with numerous mysteries regarding the functions of depression: Can we understand it as an external or internal force? Is it caused by our genetics or our environment, or an interplay, which in that cause what combination triggers it? Why does it manifest at specific points in one's life and not others? (94). In Stern's texts, she investigates differing first-person accounts of depression, ultimately finding that despite reluctance of all three authors to believe depression could be fully understood or 'conquered', they each discovered empowering and meaningful experiences through their narration. Both for their own lives, but also in hope of assisting others (97-98).

Likewise, Clark advocates for the potential benefits of narration in coping with illness and disability. She explains how individuals experiencing depression may find themselves perplexed by how they arrived at their current state and feel powerless in the face of their condition. Due to this, they might seek a 'narrative explanation' - (re)telling, plotting, and establishing relations, causes, events, and effects to create meaning (2). Clark argues for how this can feel empowering:

It is argued, then, that we should listen to personal narratives of illness and disability - really attending to them and their own merits, as opposed to using them in order to come to diagnoses an impose regimes of treatment - because such narratives give voice to the ill, the traumatized, and the disabled, those trying to make sense of catastrophic interruptions or shifts in their lives, and help them navigate the bewildering, impersonal context of medical diagnosis and treatment (3).

Clark's excerpt above highlights, in accordance with Stern's perspective, how narrative may serve as a tool to place individuals with disabilities at the forefront. Engaging with narrative can provide a sense of increased agency. Potentially one can feel a deeper sense of self-understanding and ownership of one's story. Moreover, through emphasizing listening to personal narratives we may empower and attend to the disabled, giving them a voice.

Narratives may entail an empowering and humanizing potential in the realm of illness and disability.

Stern illustrates the potential of narrating one's experiences with depression to aid in meaning-making and enhance well-being in her work, by looking to what she terms as three 'border narratives'. Border narratives within the context of depression is an intriguing term, describing how many disability-narratives function. I would posit this term provides a valuable lens through which to comprehend Esther's narrative, an exploration that will be undertaken in this thesis. In Stern's selected works, she elucidates the common imagery of 'crossing a border' when experiencing illness (96). Depression is frequently portrayed as the "nemesis" and "thief" that disrupts one's life, marking a narrative of decline where individuals transition from a state of being 'normal' and well to 'abnormal' and ill (95). Effectively conveying the experience of the other 'land' once one has 'crossed the border' proves challenging, and those who attempt to articulate it often find it incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it firsthand (97). Existing in that realm involves a desire to die tensioned with a longing to persevere (98). Another significant aspect of the border narrative is that once you have crossed into the other land, even if you manage to return (recovery), there remains a risk of crossing again (103).

Stern explains how inhabiting the 'other land' necessitates discovering ways to cope with one's depression. One may have to 'bargain' and make compromises with one's illness. This journey might narrate a shift in perspective, whereas depression, once vilified, transforms into a formidable teacher (99). In Solomon's narrative, one of the narrative's Stern examines, depression is portrayed as a spiritual learning experience, no longer seen as an adversary but rather as a crucial part of himself. He suggests that depression can be 'productive', fostering a renewed appreciation and understanding of life and self; "in depression that I learned my own acreage, the full extent of my soul" (100). Stern interestingly states: "This terrain is muddier, the paths are numerous and poorly marked, yet the three authors take routes that repeatedly intersect with one another's and arrive at nearby though different, crossing points" (98) - Stern figuratively illustrates how people may experience depression differently. While not everyone will reassess the connection between depression and self as depicted, all illness narratives tend to follow similar challenging trajectories, guiding their narrators toward finding meaning and agency.

Jennifer Radden, in "My Symptoms, Myself: Reading Mental Illness Memoirs for Identity Assumptions" in Clark's book, further theorizes the similarities and differences within illness narratives. She explains how first-person narratives of psychiatric illness may differ not only in symptoms and severity, but also in their overall nature (15). A crucial distinction lies in how the narrator constructs the relationship between identity and symptoms. Radden makes a key distinction between 'symptom alienating' and 'symptom integrating' approaches. The former being the belief that one's depression is of an agency separated from the self, and the latter being a view that the illness is part of oneself (21). While the methods may vary or converge in diverse ways, there are recognizable and valuable terms when examining how narrators perceive their relationship with their illness.

While narrative and illness can be argued to be a prevalent and beneficial pairing then, it is essential to acknowledge the myriad considerations and limitations inherent in narratives of depression. This is evidenced as a central focus in both Radden's and Clark's respective texts. I contend Clark's problematizing of the concept of agency and implications of readers' experiences to enhance narration proves very relevant for reading a narrative like *The Bell Jar*. First and foremost, she states how "the stories we tell are never entirely one's own" (4). We cannot evade the reality that our society and culture influence us, and dominant discourses shape how we construct our narratives. The myths and metaphors surrounding us might lead our narratives to perpetuate dominant orders, resulting in narratives that obscure rather than empower the self, offering only the illusion of agency (4).

Secondly, one may argue that not all experiences can be effectively conveyed through narrative form. Clark references Susan Sontag, renowned for her reflections in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). Sontag complicates how "Transforming is what art does". According to Clark, narrative akin to the photographs conveying the horrors of war that Sontag explored, involves a sort of 'aesthetic violation'. It raises the ethical issue of the boundaries narratives should adhere to and the content they may encompass. Furthermore, Clark refers to Sontag's significant reflection:

> Compassion is an unstable emotion … The question is what to do with the feeling that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated (5).

Then, not only are there potential limitations inherent in the narrative itself, but also what the audience may comprehend, and furthermore, utilize in a productive manner. I suggest these

issues are pertinent in the context of reading Plath's novel – a work often criticized for its dark themes and their consequent affects, as well as the reputation of its author, as discussed initially in this thesis.

2.1.3. Depression and Narrative: The Female Experience

A crucial aspect to consider when exploring depression and narrative is its gendered implications. In "Narrating the Emotional Woman: Uptake and Gender in Discourses on Depression" by Kimberly Emmons and "Facts Sheets as Gendered Narratives of Depression" by McMullen, in *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark*, several key considerations are presented. First and foremost, women are at a higher risk of experiencing depression, and its consequences significantly impact them. As mentioned, McCullen explains how depression is often depicted as the 'common cold' of psychiatric illnesses. While acknowledging the effectiveness of this metaphor in symbolizing its prevalence, she simultaneously argues it overlooks the gendered nature of the condition. It is consistently demonstrated that one and one-half to two times as many women compared to men report or receive diagnoses of depression. This trend is meticulously documented across diverse demographic contexts, spanning various racial groups and in both developing and developed nations, appearing in both community and clinical samples. Moreover, investigations underscore that the repercussions of depression tend to be more pronounced among women. McCullen exemplifies this by referring to a study from 2000, which revealed that when considering the amalgamated impact of years of life lost due to premature mortality and disability, depression ranked second in its severity on women aged fifteen to forty-four (127).

McCullen discusses how numerous explanations have been posited to account for this gender disparity. As previously addressed, these encompass a spectrum of possible factors, ranging from biological elements such as genetic or hormonal influences, to personality and cognitive aspects. McCullen elucidates how "Typically some combination of biological, psychological, and social variables is implicated, despite long-standing and more recent evidence of the powerful effects of social determinants in women's depression" (128). While extensive research has been conducted on depression, our understanding of how women conceptualize their distress as depression remains relatively limited. Although cultural norms, individual perspectives, and access to resources undoubtedly shape this process, data suggest that women are more likely than men to seek out online health information, with depression ranking among the most frequently researched topics (128).

In her work, McCullen goes on to examine how 'official' psychological narratives reference the gendered nature of the condition. She finds despite recognizing that women are more susceptible to depression than men, these resources often fail to examine underlying reasons. Moreover, they fail to contextualize depression within broader frameworks, treating it as an individual concern, rather than a complex societal and cultural challenge (130-132). Even when discussing factors within societal and cultural implications, such as the expectations put upon mothers when examining postpartum depression, fact sheets tend to isolate it to individual challenges of female nature (134). McCullen concludes that while authoritative sources may offer more reliable information, they often overlook women's narratives and fail to address pertinent issues effectively, prompting many women to seek information from less official and reliable platforms such as blogs and health boards (139).

Kimberly Emmons delves into the concept of women being perceived as the 'emotional sex', shedding light on its pervasive cultural acceptance and consequential implications in her respective work. This complicates McCullen's reflections, which underscores the failure to acknowledge the prevalence of depression among women while neglecting to attribute responsibility to societal and cultural constructs. Emmons contends in her work that although women are acknowledged as emotional beings, it is not in a constructive manner; rather, they are constrained and influenced in shaping their narratives, identities, and emotional experiences by the limited discourses available to them.

Emmons states that cultural archetypes and gendered ideologies pervade the discourses surrounding depression (111). She elucidates how depression, as an illness, is primarily accessed via language - through self- and peer-reporting and discussions around diagnostic criteria - finding itself situated on a continuum that ranges from 'normal' sadness to debilitating illness. She contends that this already intricate scale becomes further convoluted for women, given the perspective of their predisposition toward mood extremes. Whereas men's depression tends to be viewed as a stark departure from a 'normal' state, depression in women is more likely to be understood as an outgrowth of women's already complex affective lives; Women experience emotions more intensely, and with less perceived control, making the boundaries to fall into mental illness more precarious. Emmons underscores this notion's prevalence, as reinforced in television, news, novels, advertisements, and casual conversations. Even in academic investigations and diagnostic sensitivities. That being said, Emmons point out that women's overly emotional nature is categorized by a limited range and form of emotions. Whereas for example aggression is not

seen as appropriate for women. However, women's cultural commonplace as the emotional sex (in the expected way) can be argued to define femininity itself in our society (112).

Emmons draws from pamphlets from National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) on depression and interviews she conducted with female students who were experiencing depression. Firstly, the information provided by NIMH reveal gendered discourses. Just from the fact that the NIMH published two separate pamphlets, one targeted against a general population and one specifically towards women, we can discern a suggestion that women's depression represents a distinctiveness (112-113). Furthermore, the differing rhetoric suggests that information tailored for women tends to be more informal, moreover portraying women as inherently fluctuating in mood and in lack agency (113). Secondly, in Emmons' interviews, she observed how women have limited options of constructing the story of their emotional lives, where they only have a few available discourses to pick from: "They operate near the discursive limits imposed by this commonplace – offering small revision and challenges, but unable to tell their stories without it" (122). The interview subjects tended to either describe themselves as over-emotional in negative terms, needing to be become more rational, or their sensitivity as feminine and just who they were as women, or as needing to become more emotional to be feminine (119-121).

2.2. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan

There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women faced this schizophrenia split, and what it meant (1).

Numerous scholarly explorations into *The Bell Jar* (1963) account for the parallel of Sylvia Plath's novel with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Released concurrently, both works, each in their own stylistic approach, delve into the societal and cultural expectations put on women in the mid-20th century United States. Exploring them in tandem offers rich reflections: *The Bell Jar* offers an intimate and fictional format (albeit semi-autobiographical), whereas *The Feminine Mystique* functions as a more sociological and analytical account. These complementary perspectives shed light on the complex challenges women encountered during this period, moreover, even resonating with our contemporary discourse.

2.2.1. Betty Friedan and 'the Feminine Mystique'

In 1963, Betty Friedan (1921-2006) published *The Feminine Mystique,* a groundbreaking work that catalyzed a movement empowering women to assert their voices and mobilized widespread activism in pursuit of gender equality. In 1957, Friedan discovered through a questionnaire distributed to her former classmates that many women shared their discontent within their roles as housewives and mothers. These findings offered insights into the challenges faced by women in the post-World War II era and served as the foundation for her subsequent work. *The Feminine Mystique* became a sensation upon publication, establishing Friedan as one of the chief architects of the women's liberation movement (Shriver vi-vii).

In her introduction to the work, Lionel Shriver calls *The Feminine Mystique* "a particular historical artifact, which not only recorded history, but changed it" (vi). Shriver explains that through her book, Friedan defied the entrenched notion that women are inherently homebodies, finding contentment in the role of housewives. By confronting this perspective, Friedan empowered millions of women who had suffered in silence and isolation, believing something was wrong with them (vii). Lionel claims Friedan provided a beacon of solidarity and reassurance, emboldening women to pursue paths divergent from the societal and cultural ideals imposed upon them - paths that may align with their individual identities and aspirations. Interestingly, in today's context, we often assume that capable women can pursue education, careers, and independence without question. Lionel asserts "The very seeming irrelevance of her text today is a tribute to its radical effect" (vii). Lionel, along with myriad scholars, places considerable significance on Friedan's contribution to the 'Second Wave' of women's feminist movement.

2.2.2. 'The Problem That Has no Name'

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each Suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slip-cover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: 'Is this all?' (5).

Friedan theorized her concept 'the problem that has no name' as the sense of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment experienced by many women in suburban America during her time. In her work, she argued that societal and cultural standards dictated that woman should find fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers: "Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity" (5). Society conveyed to women that true femininity eschewed aspirations for higher education, careers, political rights, and independence. Instead, it encouraged them to view those who pursued such goals with pity (5). The idealized image presented to women was that of the devoted housewife, complete with a loving husband, home, and family - a portrayal that suggested no greater dream was attainable (7-8). However, Friedan found that both she and countless other women encountered a profound dissonance between the idealized image society projected and the actual realities of their lives (9-10).

Friedan's phrase, 'the problem that has no name', effectively captures it as an issue not easily identifiable or recognized by both women as individuals, or society as a whole. This problem deeply affected the lives of many women, leaving them confused and struggling to express it, yet remaining largely unaddressed in mainstream discourse (14-15). Friedan explained how she grasped the essence of 'the problem that has no name' through her experience of being a woman, long before delving into its broader social and psychological ramifications. When asking women to articulate their experiences with the 'problem', Friedan noted recurring themes of uncertain identity, lack of goals and meaning, feelings of fatigue, and a sense of not feeling fully alive or present. Yet, despite feelings of dismay, several women downplayed the severity of their struggles, expressing them to not be significant problems. This dismissal could be attributed to the internalization of societal expectations and norms regarding their expected roles, leading many to perceive their feelings of discontent as personal shortcomings (9-14). Friedan emphasized how 'the problem with no name' was viewed as an unimportant yet pronounced problem in society:

> So the door of all those pretty suburban houses opened a crack to permit a glimpse of uncounted thousands of American housewives who suffered alone from a problem that suddenly everyone was talking about, and beginning to take for granted, as one of those unreal problems in American life that can never be solved - like the hydrogen bombs (15).

Friedan portrayed the idealized woman as epitomized by "the proud and public image of the high school girl going steady, the college girl in love, the suburban housewife with an up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of children" (21). The image of a good woman encompassed traits of femininity, passivity, respectability, domesticity, and the core pursuit of a stable relationship with a good man, a happy family, and material possessions to satisfy her home life. Friedan argued this archetype was "created by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment, and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis" (21). Friedan provokingly noted how women's magazines exclusively revolved around narratives tailored for the idealized woman and her domestic sphere, neglecting the myriad significant historical events transpiring around them during her time:

> The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only goal of a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? (23).

In the portrayal of the good woman, a pervasive influence on women was undeniably evident across the facets of society, justifying itself in various influential constructs: "And so the feminine mystique began to spread through the land grafted on to old prejudices and comfortable conventions which easily give the past a stranglehold on the future" (28). Friedan emphasized her perspective throughout various chapters of her work, arguing that from consumer culture capitalizing on women's domestic lives, to prevailing trends within psychology and anthropology reinforcing traditional gender norms, to references in Christianity depicting Eve as submissive to Adam - the ideal of the good woman was glorified and validated, while the concept of the 'career woman' was not only a 'dirty word', but a detrimental one. Friedan argued how women were confined to roles defined by their reproductive biology, expected to conform to expectations of womanhood rather than being treated as free individuals. There was a pervasive belief that deviating from these norms would not only harm the women themselves, but also have damaging effects on their children, impede men, and negatively impact other women and society as a whole.

Friedan notes: "A mystique does not compel its own acceptance" (146). Friedan elaborated that for the feminine mystique to have compelled women, it would have had to cater to their lives and needs. She contextualized her era as one marked by constant change and uncertainty, shaped by the aftermath of a depression, a world war, and the atom bomb. In this turbulent and frightening landscape, many found solace in the familiarity and security of their homes and family-life (146). Another crucial historical aspect to mention, as men returned from war, women faced societal pressures to transition back to their traditional domestic roles from the workforce they were once needed (147). Friedan named the situation a 'comfortable concentration camp'. For she argued women trapped themselves within the narrow walls of their homes, where they had become "dependent, passive, childlike". She stated: "American women are not, of course, being readied for a mass extermination, but they are suffering a slow death of mind and spirit" (248). Albeit deeply problematic to draw such a comparison, it underscored the gravity and complexity of the situation as depicted by Friedan.

Furthermore, Friedan argued how 'the feminine mystique' wielded such power that it obscured the desires and capacities it forbade women. Moreover, how it "permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity" (53). Friedan highlighted how the societal narratives consistently funneled women back into their domestic role, regardless of possible previous aspirations. This engendered profound consequences, as women found themselves confined to roles not actively chosen, and unable to effectively imagine anything alternative (53-58). Then, faced with the realization of their idealized roles, they often found themselves at a loss. Friedan accounted for a woman who told her: "I thought I had finished. I had come to the end of childhood, had married, had a baby, and I was happy with my marriage. But somehow I was disconsolate, because I assumed this was the end" (278). Friedan enlightened how women grappled with committing to pursuits beyond their prescribed narratives. They found themselves entwined with motherhood to the point where their identities became obscure. Moreover, this resulted in many women living in a bitter vicarious reality through their children. Friedan interviewed a woman telling her: "I could not separate myself somehow", "I was always concentrating on being a good mother" (231). Another woman expressed that when her daughter was off to college, she was upset she did not choose a class she was interested in, for "That had been my dream, before I got married of course. Maybe it's better to live your own dreams" (232).

2.2.3. Facing and Solving the 'Problem'

Having delineated 'the problem that has no name' and emphasizing its ramifications, Friedan proceeded to provide solutions and inspiration for women. She amplified the voices of women who felt alone in their struggles, contending in her work that "It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home' (20). Friedan urged society to recognize that women's dissatisfaction did not stem from a deficiency in values, femininity, gratitude, material wealth, or any other excuses imposing an ideal. She asserted that "for human suffering there is a reason" (15) - emphasizing the significance of questioning why women were discontent and what could be done.

So, Friedan contended the importance of acknowledging the issue, however, she cautioned that "To face the problem is not to solve it" (274). She demonstrated an understanding of the fear and uncertainty that would accompany women facing the problem and grappling to solve it. She explained that it is daunting for a woman to seek answers to the voices inside her mind asking who you are and what you want - for ultimately, it is only herself that can answer. Nevertheless, Friedan argued vehemently that this self-discovery was imperative, urging women to break out of their feminist adjustments and blind conformity. Drawing from interviews with women at different stages of this journey - some just beginning to confront the problem, some on their way to finding solutions, and others already finding themselves on the other side - Friedan observed that the process would vary widely (274). Nonetheless, regardless of duration, difficulty, and nature of the solutions, Friedan underscored in her work that while this journey would be undeniably challenging, it was essential in the path towards well-being.

Drawing from her own personal reflections and interactions with other women to elucidate pathways towards resolving the problem, Friedan outlined the concept of crafting 'a new life plan for women'. First and foremost, her advice entailed recognizing that homemaking and being a housewife were not inherent purposes in themselves. It was crucial to brush "aside the veil of over-glorification imposed by the feminine mystique" (278). In the last chapter of her text, Friedan contended that a woman devoid of her own purpose, aspirations, and identity, would persistently experience a sense of desperation. According to her, a woman needed to explore her self-identity, her desires, and challenge her capacities. She needed to pursue self-discovery and define herself outside of her home, family, and gender. Friedan elucidated that changes need not necessarily be drastic alterations to the

woman's life, but rather about discovering interests and making commitments to herself. She particularly emphasized the empowerment found in education and professional opportunities, often forsaken by many women due to her pressures.

From implementing these values, Friedan encountered reaffirming expressions from women regarding the positive experiences they generated. Friedan accounted for a woman that told her that she was once angry when confronted by an elderly woman if she did not "want to be more than an animal?" (275), as a response to her placing motherhood as the purpose of life. However, when she began acting more authentically to herself, gaining a sense of herself, and committing to her needs - she "began to enjoy being a woman" (276). Another woman Friedan interviewed, a mental-health educator, told her that in her time as 'just a housewife' in her community she felt unfulfilled: "I remember my own feeling that life wasn't enough for me. I wasn't using myself in terms of my capacities. [...] You can't deny your intelligent mind; you need to be part of the social scheme" (279). Similarly, Friedan recounted the story of woman in her forties who, upon pursuing her lifelong wish of playing the violin, finally found contentment: "It exhausts me and hurts my shoulder, but it makes me feel at one with something larger than myself. The universe suddenly becomes real, and you're part of it. You feel as if you really exist" (277).

Friedan not only assigned responsibility to women individually, but also strongly emphasized the role of society. Friedan advocated the necessity for professional fields, politics, businesses, arts, sciences, higher education, and communities to collaborate and facilitate in providing space for women - not as the 'second sex', but as valued individuals who need not sacrifice nor abandon their aspirations or diminish their worth (301-308). Friedan referred to a woman who went to a psychiatrist with her dismay: "He kept trying to make me enjoy being feminine, but it didn't help" (276). Friedan contended that it is imperative that facets of society acknowledge women's struggles. Moreover, Friedan rejected the notion of feminism as one of "history's dirty jokes" (60), urging society to appreciate the passion of women who rebel and forge new paths. She accounted for how real political change can occur. Friedan concluded her book with an inspiring reflection that underscored the mutual benefit for all members of society in addressing the feminine mystique as a necessary development:

When their mother's fulfillment makes girls sure they want to be women, they will not have to 'beat themselves down' to be feminine; they can stretch and stretch until their own efforts will tell them who they are. They will not need to regard of boy or man to

feel alive. And women do not need to live through their husbands and children, men will not fear the love and strength of women, nor need another's weakness to prove their own masculinity. They can finally see each other as they are. And this may be the next step in human evolution. [...] It has barely begun, the search for women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to be complete (309).

2.3.   *The Promise of Happiness* **by Sara Ahmed**

Professor Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) presents a captivating cultural critique and reflection on our relationship with 'happiness', illuminating the consequences that arises from it. Through exploration of the intellectual history of happiness and engagements with feminist critics, Ahmed raises critical questions about the world-making effects of 'the promise of happiness'. This work proves exceptionally relevant in today's culture fixated on happiness. It effectively sets the stage for an exploration of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), by providing insights that resonate in Esther's struggle with societal demands versus her individual aspirations and mental health. Furthermore, it complements the previously discussed *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), as likewise exploring societal ideals and agendas in a more contemporary lens.

Ahmed initiates her book by elucidating the undeniable value and status happiness holds. Happiness is what we desire, what we aim for, what gives us purpose, and what creates meaning and order to our lives. It serves as a "wish, a will, a want" (2). Ahmed argues it is necessary to delve into reflections on the concept of 'happiness', a word that often seems self-explanatory, yet carries immense meaning. It is impossible to think of happiness without forming positive connotations. Thus, it becomes thought-provoking to encounter the perspective that happiness can indeed foster 'unhappy effects'. Ahmed asserts in her work that 'the promise of happiness' - is the promise of happiness for those who live their lives in a prescribed manner, paving a non-inclusive path that justifies oppression.

2.3.1. Happiness-Obsessed Society

Ahmed conveys society's obsession with happiness by delineating its myriad facets that emphasize it. Firstly, happiness has become an industry. The significant growth of the 'happiness industry' highlights a cultural emphasis on personal development and well-being. Through the popularity of self-help books, CDs, and other consumer resources, individuals

are increasingly investing to enhance their happiness (3). Furthermore, in academic disciplines such as history, architecture, psychology, social policy, and economics - happiness has become a focal point and a primary objective. For instance, within the realm of psychology, there is a prominent emphasis on happiness as the 'solution'. To become better is to feel better: "Happiness becomes the means to an end, as well as the end of the means" (10). Moreover, contemporary media discourse is saturated with their focus on happiness, reflecting the trend of basing worth on happiness. This sentiment is echoed in policy and governance frameworks, which are increasingly geared towards implementing schemes and measurements of well-being. Ahmed interestingly exemplifies this by referring to the Kingdom of Bhutan's introduction of the Gross National Happiness/GNH, supplementing the Gross Domestic Product/GDP in 1972. Ahmed states that happiness becomes the "ultimate progress indicator" (4).

However, Ahmed problematizes the complexities in the measurements of happiness. Central to this is the underlying assumption that happiness is quantifiable. Ahmed questions how we may ever effectively measure something so inherently subjective and complex as happiness. Being able to would presume a transparent understanding of one's own emotional state and an ability to express it in quantifiable signifiers. Moreover, affect is multifaceted, and we simply do not exist in a world of distinctive 'good' and 'bad'. Additionally, it is the paradox of how we wish to be happy, so being asked if we are will never be a neutral inquiry. Ahmed also points out that happiness research does not only aim to measure feeling, but also interprets what it measures (5-6).

2.3.2. 'Happy Objects', 'Affective Communities', and 'Good Habits'

Explaining what defines 'happiness' does not come across as a simple task, however, Ahmed offers valuable insights that enhance our understanding of happiness by describing it as a complex blend of associations, drive, and affects. Firstly, she explains how the history of the concept can be thought of as a history of associations: "In wishing for happiness we wish to be associated with happiness, which means to be associated with its associations (2). Happiness is promised through the cultivation of specific associations and drives, which in turn guides our pursuits. This notion carries significant implications, as Ahmed notes: "Happiness shapes what coheres as a world" (2). Additionally, Ahmed clarifies that happiness is an accumulation - a state of being affected by something (21). This latter description may be one more familiar to most, as many would simply call happiness a feeling. With Ahmed's

nuanced reflections, it becomes apparent that happiness is not only a destination of affect we seek, but also a dynamic force that influences and is influenced by our reality. Ahmed has coined the pivotal concept 'happy objects', embodying our perceptions of happiness, which forms 'affective communities', and in turn establishes a hierarchy with those of 'good habits' as superior.

Firstly, being affected by 'something' introduces Ahmed's concept of 'happy objects', which she defines as: "Simply those objects that affect us in the best way" (22). To be affected demands evaluating and we label those things we find delightful as happy objects (23). These objects accumulate positive affective value. We enjoy them and want to gather them around us. The affective value can survive the coming and going of physical whereabouts, as we can be happily affected in direct encounter, but also in anticipation of (24-25). Ahmed describes how happy objects can be many things, ranging from tangible things to more abstract ideas. It can simply be some fruit one enjoys. However, it can also be 'the family', due to idealization of family life, that makes individuals work to find happiness through conventional family structure (45).

Secondly, as we are directed towards what we deem happy objects, we align ourselves with people who invest in the same things as the causes of happiness (38). It is commonly acknowledged that we tend to like people who appreciate the same things as ourselves. Ahmed elucidates how we create bonds through likes, moreover shaping 'affective communities'. She points out that the role affects play as a shared orientation is explicit in classical philosophy. She refers to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*: "Isn't it the sharing of feelings and pleasure and distress which binds a community together - when (in so far as it feasible) a whole citizen body feels more or less the same pleasure or distress at the same time gains and losses" (38). Ahmed explains that it is not necessarily the feelings in their own sense that bind us, but the alignment of deposits of these feelings into things, deeming them happy (or 'un-happy') objects (38).

Thirdly, 'good habits' refer to behaviors prescribed as in conjunction with societal standards, in other words, it problematizes the pressure to adhere to conformity (33). Certain actions, attitudes, and lifestyle choices are labeled commendable within the given cultural framework. The pursuit of happiness, in alignment with others, ties to the societal demand for happiness. The promise of happiness - the promise to those who follow the normative path. Moreover, it establishes a social hierarchy: "This affective differentiation is the basis of an

essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value" (34). Ahmed's work problematizes this concept specifically, for by following what is considered good and right, we secure our place on the conventional path, and consequently, place ourselves in the majority group of morally superior individuals, ultimately placing someone beneath.

2.3.3. 'Anxious Narratives', 'Affect Aliens', and 'Troublemakers'

As depicted, when the promise of happiness and what is good and right is tied to a specific trajectory, it inherently excludes alternative paths: "To consider happiness a form of world making is to consider how happiness makes the world cohere around, as it were, the right people" (13). When the promise of happiness goes unmet, Ahmed's depiction of 'anxious narratives', 'affect aliens', and her concept of 'troublemakers' enter the discussion.

Anxious narratives entail the gap between how we should feel and how we actually feel, or the gap between how we feel and how we act. Feeling like one is reacting wrongly, or should feel one way or another, is arguably a very relatable feeling. However, it is experienced as a very lonely one. Ahmed paints a clear picture by describing a bride's wedding day. She refers to the notion that this day is supposed to be 'the happiest day. However, this very expectation may cause it to become a challenging occasion. If the bride of a wedding seems displeased, this spoils the wedding, and we may think she 'affected inappropriately' (41-42). Although a wedding is not a common occurrence, the expectations of acting certain ways are implemented in encounters we face every day. Forcing oneself to affect according to societal and cultural standards causes uneasiness according to Ahmed. It might make us feel alienated from our own 'happiness'. Furthermore, Ahmed terms the intriguing terms 'affect aliens' as "those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world" (164).

Embracing a departure from expectations and societal ideals creates the 'troublemakers'. As previously discussed in the context of a wedding, deviating from expectations leads to disappointment to those around. The guidelines for acting certain ways in affect serve as 'happiness scripts' and we are assigned a sort of duty to abide by these for the common good (59). Feminists are a typical example of individuals that may challenge this, that Ahmed coins 'Feminist killjoys', proving most relevant to Esther's narrative as a young woman challenging societal ideals. Ahmed points out how the word feminist is saturated with unhappiness: "My experience of being a feminist has taught me much about

rolling eyes" (65). For the 'feminist killjoy', as one of Ahmed's archetypes of troublemakers, disturbs the social bonding and 'fantasies' of our society. Ahmed exemplifies how if a misogynistic joke is made and the feminist does not laugh, they are viewed as grumpy and denying of the 'happiness solidarity'. Furthermore, Ahmed elucidates how feminists are frequently judged for creating arguments. Interestingly, one side may argue feminists are exposing issues in society, whereas others might view it as them causing the issues. Ahmed's reflection here is very intriguing – she states that "To kill a fantasy can still kill a feeling" (66). For regardless of whether one believes a feminist is in their right or being destructive, it can foster a dismay either way.

2.3.4. The Freedom to be 'Unhappy'

Ahmed advocates for the benefits of embracing unhappiness - or rather, rejecting 'the promise of happiness'. As illustrated, happiness may serve as a justification for constructing a harmful narrative around us, excluding anything that does not conform to it. Much like Friedan, Ahmed explains that challenging prevalent dynamics in society is highly demanding. As exemplified, being a feminist and highlighting societal flaws places one in a stigmatized category. However, Ahmed urges us to reconsider our pairing of feminism with unhappiness. For pointing out sources of unhappiness or refusing to feign false happiness does not directly lead to the culmination of unhappiness. Ahmed points out that "To refuse the promise of happiness is to refuse the demand that you show signs of happiness" (69). Rejecting false happiness is not the same as rejecting happiness. Certainly, it can provoke feelings of discontent as we become increasingly aware of the world's flaws and realities hiding beneath 'happiness' and alienate ourselves from conformity. As Ahmed states: "To revitalize the critique of happiness is to be willing to be proximate to unhappiness" (87). Yet, in doing so, Ahmed argues we uncover numerous possibilities for ourselves as individuals and for society as a whole. Ahmed points out "Consciousness-raising does not turn unhappy wives into happy feminists, even though sometimes we might wish that this were the case!" (70). Yet, questioning the authority of happiness and world-making effects is needed.

Firstly, Ahmed elucidates that by eschewing the superficial and expected expression of happiness, we embark on a journey towards greater authenticity, unveiling the genuine sources of our contentment. We could be allowed to rediscover our identities beyond the constraints imposed by societal norms and ideals, liberating us from the dictated conventional paths. Furthermore, there exists value within the spectrum of affects and experiences that

diverge from conventional happiness. Ahmed accounts for society's pervasive fixation on happiness, a dynamic that in turns stigmatizes those states deemed antithetical. Neutrality is misconstrued as pessimism, and our society incessantly tells us to perceive the glass as half full. Passivity is vilified and suffering is cast as an evil. Nonetheless, Ahmed challenges this, embracing the entirety of the human experience. This broader perspective views the values in each affectation and experience and urges a reconsideration of our societal and cultural connotations, inviting a more multifaceted, authentic, and healthy nature of existing (192-198).

Secondly, and of utmost significance, by dismantling the automatic authority attributed to happiness, we open the door to better our society. Ahmed advocates that beneath the veil of the promise of happiness lies possibilities for political change and cooperation. We may see issues more clearly for what they are, no longer blinded by an imposed narrative, and avoid marginalizing those who fall outside this narrative. Ahmed draws upon the insights of philosopher and feminist thinker Marilyn Frye: "It is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signify our docility and our acquiescence in our situation" (66). As individuals, it is crucial that we possess the freedom and capability to express discontent and collaborate towards improving our situations. Ahmed compellingly argues for a reassessment of happiness as the ultimate objective:

> I am not suggesting here that our aim is to cause unhappiness. It is not that unhappiness becomes our telos: rather, if we no presume happiness is our telos, unhappiness would register as more than what gets in the way. When we are no longer sure what gets in the way, then 'the way' itself becomes a question. The freedom to be unhappy might provide the basis for a new political ontology, which, in not taking happiness as an agreed endpoint for human action, would be able to ask about the point of action. We might act politically because we do not agree about the ends of action" (195-196).

2.4.   Theoretical Lens: Concluding Remarks

As stated initially in this chapter, I aimed to establish a theoretical frame to which we could effectively investigate the representation of mental health, its function, and its effects of in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963).

Firstly, by examining the interplay between depression and narrative, particularly within gendered discourses, we have uncovered insights into the intricate nature of mental health and the construction of narratives. Depression, despite being a well-researched

condition affecting millions globally, remains stigmatized and often misunderstood. Narration emerges as a tool for individuals grappling with depression to create meaning and agency in their lives, moreover, to voice their struggles to others. While illness narratives vary, they often share commonalities and limitations worth nothing. It is particularly valuable to note the concept of Stern's 'border narrative', which elucidates the experience of crossing into a new land with its distinctive and dark features when becoming depressed. Alongside Emmon's 'symptom alienating' and 'symptom integrating', illuminating the relationship between illness and self. Furthermore, depression's gendered nature proves significant when examining women's search for meaning and self amidst mental illness. Women constitute a substantial proportion of depression cases with major implications, yet their experiences often lack adequate recognition and representation.

Secondly, the theories derived from Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) are highly relevant in our discourses on mental health. They shed light on the pervasive influence and power of societal ideals and agendas, which can marginalize and hinder individuals, specifically women or the mentally ill within this context, who may struggle to conform or choose not to do so. These insights provide invaluable in the context for understanding and challenging the broader societal forces at play in shaping individuals' experiences with their selves and their surroundings.

This theoretical frame will be key to explore Esther, a mentally ill women sharing her narrative, exposing the intricate interplay of her as an individual grappling with her mental health midst her society.

3. The Narrator Esther Greenwood

At the core of what enthralls many readers about *The Bell Jar* (1963) is its narrator: Esther Greenwood. I contend the novel's allure lies in Esther's narration, with her unflinching and visceral perceptions, captivatingly depicting her view of both the world around her and her inner life. She depicts a rare candor, employing vivid, raw, and brutal descriptions, as well as intricate metaphors to convey her experiences. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2020), Abbott explains how "the narrator" is often described as "an instrument" (74). I find this definition intriguing, as it aligns with my view of the narrator as an essential device. I posit Plath skillfully constructed a protagonist who is tenacious, outspoken, and grappling with challenges, thereby offering a unique first-person narrative perspective that depicts a nuanced and authentic portrayal of mental health. Engaging with Lilian R. Furst, Linda Wagner-Martin, and Howard Moss, I will elucidate the imperative ways Esther's narration functions to represent mental health in *The Bell Jar.* This will effectively set the stage for further engagement with the portrayal she provides.

I will first examine the singular perspective and the question of its reliability, then explore the unique tone of the narration, followed by an investigation of its 'erratic' form. Additionally, each of these sections will offer textual analysis to present the identified functions. While there are many segments of the novel that would prove interesting to explore for this purpose, I particularly highlight Chapter 13 as the most compelling – a single chapter that encapsulates all the key features I aim to establish very effectively.

3.1. Singular Perspective and Reliability

First and foremost, Abbott's explanations of "voice" and "focalization" prove useful when discussing Esther's narration. Voice in narration entails who we hear and plays a critical role in shaping narrative construction. Who we hear colors the story and it is important for us to consider *who* the voice is. Likewise, focalization contributes richly to our experience with a story, being the lens which we see through (76-80). Although *The Bell Jar* features several pivotal characters, Esther stands as the sole conduit of information. She remains the voice we hear and the perspective through which we see. The singular perspective offered through Esther's first-person narration problematizes the question of reliability. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the exclusive and tendentious perspective is key in conveying mental health struggles.

Esther's reliability, being the sole source of information, is a subject of frequent scholarly debate due to her notably biased perspective on various matters. Explained in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative,* the reliability of a narrator pertains to the extent to which we can depend on, trust, and respect their narrative. The concept of 'unreliable narrators' complicates matters by questioning the accuracy of presented facts and validity of offered perspectives (Abbott 82-83). An example of a critic problematizing Esther's narration is Lilian R. Furst, in her "The Ogre and the Fairy Godmother ", a chapter in *Just Talk: Narratives of Psychotherapy* (1999). Furst explains that by having characters focalized solely through Esther, "the potential for distortion based on her subjective responses is considerably magnified" (137). Also, given Esther grapples with profound depression, Furst also points out that her perspective will be heavily influenced by her mental health. Evident in her title, Furst exemplified this by examining Esther's vastly divergent perception of two therapists, questioning: "To what extent does the first-person narration of *The Bell Jar* lead to a one-sided, biased account of psychotherapy? Is Dr. Gordon excessively demonized just as the other therapist may be unduly glorified?" (137). So, I acknowledge it is crucial to question reliability and maintain a critical stance toward offered perspectives. Moreover, like discussed in the preceding chapter, illness narratives inherently come with limitations and considerations. Nevertheless, various Plath scholars and I advocate for embracing the exclusive perspective as a pivotal function for *The Bell Jar.*

An example of a critic further discussing the functions of Esther's narration, emphasizing its effective aspects, is Linda Wagner-Martin, a prominent scholar of Plath's work. She examines Esther as the narrator of *The Bell Jar* in her book *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* (1992). In support of my position, she argues that the questioning of credibility serves as a deliberate strategy employed by Plath:

> Plath's strategy in her opening plays on the reader's familiarity with twentieth-century first-person narrative. In a usual first-person narrative, the reader has some acceptance of the narrative voice. The first-person technique allows the reader to feel close to the character, to understand the character's motivation, because the process of language allows greater insight into the workings of the character's mind, moral values system, and personality. In *The Bell Jar,* however, Plath is intentionally interfering with the confidence the reader expects to have in the narrative voice. She is making the reader question the credibility of that voice (25).

Wagner-Martin's initial point highlights Plath's strategy of establishing familiarity through the narrative voice, fostering acceptance and intimacy, before deliberately disrupting it to provoke reader skepticism. Overall, then, Wagner-Martin claims that Esther's voice reflects her mental state and forces the reader to react. In the very first sentence of *The Bell Jar,* Esther states: "I didn't know what I was doing in New York " and that she is "stupid about executions" (1). Wagner-Martin explains that this is seemingly unfortunate; for what confidence can we put in a protagonist that by her own admission lacks sense of direction/meaning and calls herself stupid. However, we must ask ourselves what the intention of this is. Esther's voice is constructed by her mental state, according to Wagner-Martin being "ill", "mentally upset", "depressed", and "lost". As in Esther's own words, she "knew something was wrong with [her] that summer" (2). Wagner-Martin contends Plath creates an "abnormal", "unreliable", and "defeated" narrator, yet a narrator aware and admitting of it. Therefore, the singular perspective of Esther grants the reader insight into how deeply Esther struggles mentally and provokes us to reflect (25-27).

Building upon Furst and Wagner-Martin, I posit that Esther's distinctive voice and focalization establish a profound connection with readers, immersing us in her struggles. The narrative unfolds as if we are privy to her intimate confidences, inviting us to her inner world. We are offered the narrative through Esther's eyes and mind, feeling as though she is reaching out to us, seeking help amidst her struggles. As both Clark and Stern have highlighted in their respective works, depression is characterized by its bewildering and distressing nature. Through Esther's lens, readers are offered a unique vantage point of the complexities of mental struggles, regardless of their own mental state.

3.1.1. Singular Perspective and Reliability: Turning to The Text

As introduced, I wish to delve deeper into *The Bell Jar* to illustrate the functions as we progress, selecting Chapter 13 for this purpose. This pivotal chapter marks a significant juncture in Esther's narrative, serving as a climatic turning point which Esther seems to have been inexorably drawn towards. Through various descriptions and scenes portraying her escalating suicidal ideation and preoccupation with mortality, Chapter 13 culminates in Esther's harrowing attempt to take her own life. Undoubtedly a crucial chapter for the narrative, however as mentioned not chosen merely for its plot significance, but for its remarkable demonstration that encapsulates the key features of the perspective, tone, and form.

First and foremost, I would argue this chapter hinges on Esther's singular perspective and its inherent subjectivity. Without these conditions, the narrative function of this chapter would be significantly compromised. My argument is grounded in how inconsequential the majority of the superficial action in this chapter is, contrasted with the significance of Esther's inner monologue and perspectives. To illustrate this, I wish to focus on one of the more substantial plotlines in this chapter: Esther's visit to the beach with her friend Jody, Jody's boyfriend, and Cal, whom Jody has just introduced. For the surface events here portray Esther enjoying a trip to the beach: engaging in friendly and engaging conversation with a newly met man, savoring a hot dog with her friends, and playfully swimming. However, Esther's narration paints a grim version of this seemingly pleasant scene.

The opening line of the chapter, "Of course his mother killed him", uttered by Cal, serves as a jolting introduction to the reader. This line is part of a conversation between him and Esther, discussing a play wherein a mother contemplates killing her son due to his madness resulting from a brain disease. Their discussion opens for Esther's seemingly nonchalant inquiry to Cal: "If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?" (150). While laying on her back, she attempts to maintain a casual tone, yet her mind is anything but casual. While Cal may perceive his conversation with Esther as a mere engaging, albeit gloomy dialogue, Esther's perspective unveils a starkly different reality to the reader. Esther is meticulously dissecting Cal's responses, driven by her quest for answers in the midst of her fixation on madness, death, and the outcomes of various suicide methods. The choice of play centered around themes of death and madness is by no means a random choice either. Spending the day at the beach with friends is typically associated with enjoyment, Esther is however merely maintaining a facade:

> Being with Jody and Mark and Cal was beginning to weigh on my nerves, like a dull wooden block on the strings of a piano. I was afraid that at any moment my control would snap, and I would start babbling about how I couldn't read and couldn't write and how I must be just about the only person who has stayed awake for a solid month without dropping dead of exhaustion (150-151).

So, what might be enjoyable for a mentally well person feels superficial and hopeless for our narrator. On the surface, everything might appear normal, however Esther is barely holding herself together. Esther wonders how this idyllic scene could be so hopeless to her: "I wondered at what point in space the silly, sham blue of the sky turned black" (151). When her

friends are getting hot dogs, Esther discreetly buries hers under the sand, obtaining from eating. As Esther makes her way towards the water, her friends assume she is simply going for a swim, where Jody gives Cal "a playful little push". Esther's intentions are far from seeking a refreshing dip; she desires to swim so far that she will drown: "I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die" (151). During this, she thinks back to trying to hang herself earlier that very morning. The scene concludes with Esther returning to shore, unable to prevent herself from floating up from the water.

> I knew I was beaten.
> I turned back (155).

In essence, Esther's singular perspective and brutally honest narration immerse the reader into a world vastly different from the physical one she inhabits. I posit that her profound turmoil is laid bare to the reader, portraying her experience of existing in the other land of a 'border narrative'. While the questioning of reliability is important in literary studies, I suggest it is crucial to acknowledge the effects of how this narration solely belongs to Esther - a significant function to effectively represent an individual in mental anguish. As Wagner-Martin asserts, I agree that the reader is intended to recognize that there is something amiss with Esther and her worldview. In her existence as depressed, the seemingly delightful summer day with a blue sky is transformed into a gloomy existence with a black sky.

3.2.   The Unique Tone

It is no secret that *The Bell Jar* grapples with profoundly somber and macabre themes. I would argue the novel's unique tone plays a paramount role in effectively representing mental turmoil. It embodies a delicate interplay between gloom and comedy, residing in the liminal space between darkness and light. In "Illness Pervades *The Bell Jar*" featured in *Depression in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* (2012), Howard Moss discusses this balance. He claims that what makes the novel work and characterizes its tone is the equilibrium between "genuine desperation at one side of the scale and a sure sense of black comedy at the other" (66). He begins his stance by highlighting some significant and dark scenes from the novel, such as Doreen lying in a hotel hallway in a pool of her own vomit, a mass ptomaine poisoning at a fashion event, Buddy contracting tuberculosis, Esther breaking her legs when skiing, Esther experiencing hemorrhaging after losing her virginity, and her friend's tragic suicide after assisting her to the hospital. He explains that merely recounting these intensely grim events

would be absurd. However, with the implication of Esther's wit, irony, intelligence, self-mocking and humor, the novel becomes balanced with its gallows humor (65-66).

In support of Moss, I would argue the events in *The Bell Jar* would be overwhelmingly dark without the infusion of absurdity and humor to render them palatable and enjoyable for readers. To depict such a grim portrayal of mental turmoil while maintaining comedic elements for the reader's enjoyment would appear to be a strategic choice in the construction of the narrative. With this approach, Plath is able to tell Esther's harrowing story and struggles in a raw manner, without alienating possible audience. Moreover, and I would claim more importantly, it does not sacrifice the readers' compassion. Wagner-Martin, like Moss, explores the unique tone of *The Bell Jar.* She states that "The supposed comedy the novel achieves is never pure comedy, it is always tempered with the reader's sympathy for Esther" (27). Wagner-Martin contends that the distinctive and peculiar tone serves to alert the reader that this is not a "normal voice", but a voice meant to instill a sense of urgency that Esther requires help. In that case, I would propose that the reading experience itself also finds itself in a delicate balance of both captivating and distressing.

3.2.1.   The Unique Tone: Turning to the Text

While numerous instances throughout the novel and within Chapter 13 offer opportune to interestingly dissect the unique tone of Esther's narration, her recollection of her suicide attempt while spending time at the beach stands out as particularly compelling. Few occurrences could prove as starkly dark as a suicide attempt, and it is astonishing how such a topic could ever be rendered humorous. The section of Esther's retrospection, much like the chapter itself, begins abruptly and shockingly: "That morning I had tried to hang myself" (152). Esther recounts how, upon her mother's departure for work, she swiftly obtained the silk cord from her bathrobe, fashioning it into a knot before searching for a place to attach it. She describes difficulty creating her knot: "It took me a long time to do this, because I was poor at knots and had no idea how to make a proper one" (152). Then Esther describes her challenge to find a suitable location to hang it from: "The trouble was, our house had the wrong kind of ceilings" (152). She proceeds to elaborate on a description of the house, shifting the focus for a brief period, before returning to her intent:

> After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight (152).

Her descriptions then describe how she would try to pull the cord as tightly as she managed, but how her body "had all sorts of tricks". Esther's hand would go limp and if it were not up to her body's reaction, she "would be dead in a flash". Esther states "I would simply have to ambush it with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years with no sense at all" (153).

The act of suicide is undoubtedly horrid and not a matter to be taken lightly, however, Esther's portrayal adds a layer of absurdity to the scene. Initially, she grapples with tying the knot, then struggles to find a suitable location, and ultimately, her body fails to carry out her intent. The manner in which she depicts her struggles to end her life imbues the narrative with a sense of dark humor. We certainly do not wish for anyone to succeed in taking their own life. Esther's self-deprecating remarks about her knot-tying skills, her critique of the ceilings, and her frustration with her body's resilience against her efforts create an oddly humorous contrast. Describing her suicide implement as a "yellow cat's tail" paints a bizarre picture that underscores this juxtaposition. Additionally, her sudden divergence into describing the architecture and history of her house amidst her attempt adds to the peculiarity of the event.

The unique tone of Esther is then able to both depict deep mental anguish and suicidality, as well as being imbued with humorous elements making it of almost entertaining character. Both Moss and Wagner-Martin argue that the tone of the novel is notably distinct, marked by a blend of darkness and humor. Furthermore, as Wagner-Martin emphasizes, something is very wrong - Esther's attempt to end her life serves as a sign to the reader of her profound turmoil. Also, as theorized in the initially in this thesis, depression may manifest as a desire to die alongside an instinct to survive (Stern 98). The event of Esther's suicide attempt is a juxtaposition of her expressed desire to die and her body's resistance to such a fate, much like the juxtaposed tone.

3.3. The 'Erratic' Form

It might be argued that the seemingly 'erratic' form of *The Bell Jar* serves as a pivotal factor in granting readers insight into the intricacies of a mentally struggling character's psyche and furthermore fostering an emotional connection. This is a focal point of Wagner-Martin's exploration of the novel in her book *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties*. Wagner-Martin points out that "It is literally hard at times to figure out what is being said" when reading the novel (25). She delineates several factors behind this. Firstly, Esther's narration is saturated with figurative language, necessitating the reader to consistently decode metaphors and

symbolism to access information. Secondly, the pacing and temporal structure fluctuate significantly. Sections may alternate between dramatic and slow-paced depictions, followed by quick and lighthearted moments. Esther transitions, without warning, between past events and present, while chapters may encompass multiple plotlines or focus solely on one narrative. Thirdly, the juxtaposition of vastly differing scenes and feelings create a rollercoaster for the reader, propelling us from one emotional state to another (25-29).

I concur with Wagner-Martin's argument that "The prose style itself is meant to convey the mental anguish of the protagonist" (26). Esther's overwhelming sense of disorientation and confusion is mirrored in her narrative style, which becomes disjointed and intense as a result: "Plath forces a number of scenes, objects, and reflections into the fragmented but relentless stream that makes up Esther's consciousness" (31). A linear and rational storytelling would prove inappropriate, as it should align with Esther's tumultuous inner turmoil. As cleverly put by Wagner-Martin, "Only Mrs. Greenwood would expect order during a breakdown" (73). Wagner-Martin also offers an interesting observation regarding how contemporary critics underestimated this, mistakenly attributing Esther's narration to a stereotype of a flighty, scatterbrained, young American girl of her time. However, as previously stated, it is through recognizing that the voice reflects a troubled psyche that we can fully decode its impact and appreciate the form (26-27). As Wagner-Martin states, most novels do not have such an effect as *The Bell Jar* and its juxtaposition and fragmentation proves to be one of the most effective devices of the work (31).

As introduced, not only does the form function in adeptly reflecting its narrator's mental state, but it also affects the reader's mental state and encourages a sense of empathy with the character of Esther. Firstly, as the narrative mirrors a frustrated and confused Esther, the reader, is likewise put in this state. I consider this one of the most impressive qualities of *The Bell Jar*: It goes further than eliciting sympathy by its portrayal, in fact it compels empathy by evoking similar feelings in us as the narrator we are following. While acknowledging that our experience of challenging emotions through reading is incomparable to the background of Esther's turmoil, it remains fascinating to feel a sense of kinship in shared struggle. Secondly, due to Esther's narration, the reader is urged to form objective versions of the narrative. Wagner-Martin argues this and points out we recognize Esther's perspective as the subjective perspective of a confused and sad character: "The rose colored glasses of narrative observation in *The Bell Jar* have become blinders, and Esther cannot find anything that brings her happiness" (74). Therefore, Wagner-Martin explains we are

encouraged to reflect on Esther's reality and made aware that we do not have to accept her outlook. Sometimes, Esther's narration even allows glimpses of other character's views of her, in fact contesting her own views, if we pay enough attention (74).

3.3.1. The 'Erratic' Form: Turning to the Text

Finally, I would argue Chapter 13 represents the most overwhelming and disorienting section of *The Bell Jar*. This assertion aligns with the argument that its form mirrors the deteriorating mental state of its narrator, as the chapter concludes with a serious suicide attempt. As previously noted in my analysis of the preceding readings, the sections of this chapter commence abruptly. Esther provides no indication of when she transitions between narrating past memories and describing present events, whereas her all actions are accompanied by rampant inner monologue. To exemplify this, the narrative of this chapter encompasses Esther's visit to the beach, her suicide attempt in the morning, a return to the beach, her voluntary work at a hospital, a visit to a graveyard, and another more serious suicide attempt. Furthermore, it delves into her contemplations on mortality, the repercussions of suicide, the prospect of joining a monastery, her unresolved feelings regarding her father's death, and her realization of how she will go about her suicide attempt that concludes the chapter. All of these events and thoughts packed into barely 15 pages creates a confusing, yet intensely immersive reading experience, especially given the harrowing conclusion of the chapter and its climatic role in Esther's worsening mental state.

The 'erratic' form of the text, consisting of overwhelming and disorienting characteristics, depicts then both the anguish of Esther and serves to evoke affect in the reader as well. As theorized by Wagner-Martin, the differing pacing, temporal structure, lack of explanation, and overall unsettling nature of the novel is very distinctive to Esther's narration. It functions to vividly depict her struggles and bring the reader along for the ride.

3.4.   The Narrator Esther Greenwood: Concluding Remarks

From examining the unique perspective, tone, and form of Esther Greenwood's narration, this thesis argues that these are imperative functions to portray mental health. Firstly, Esther's perspective is defined by its inherent subjectivity and candidness, representing the mental state of an ill individual, further forging an intimate relationship with her. Secondly, the tone and events in *The Bell Jar* (1963) is significantly dark, nevertheless the infusion of absurdity renders the novel enjoyable. Thirdly, the form reflects the turmoil of mental illness and brings

the reader on an emotional rollercoaster. Then, these key features can be said to paint an intriguing and authentic portrayal of mental health, while creating an intimate and affective reading experience. In connection to illness and narrative, *The Bell Jar* offers valuable insight to both those who have never experienced depression and to those who have been affected, resonating long after the final page is turned.

4. Trapped Under the Bell Jar

> To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream (Plath 227)

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), figurative language abounds, with none more striking than the one embodied in its very title. The significance of the titular metaphor captures the attention of myriad Plath critics, arguing for the centrality of its symbolism. Scholarly interpretation of the symbolism may vary; however, most focus on it as serving a depiction of mental anguish or societal confinement. When navigating possible readings, Lilian R. Furst's "The Ogre and the Fairy Godmother" proves particularly enlightening. Furst initiates her exploration of the bell jar by providing a definition: "A bell jar is a cylindrical glass vessel with a rounded top and open base used to protect and display fragile objects or to establish a controlled atmosphere or environment in a scientific experiment" (130). She proposes that this definition, with its dual interpretation, mirrors Esther's reality. Firstly, Esther views herself and is viewed by others as fragile, requiring protection. Secondly, Esther exists in regulated reality, manifested in various dimensions: under the dominion of her mother, ensnared by societal and cultural norms, and subject to the dictates of institutional authority. Thirdly, the metaphor of the bell jar carries two further connotations for Esther: the imposed enclosure of depression as the jar descends, and more optimistically, the jar's ascent toward recovery (130). In accordance with my personal perspective and the construction of this thesis, the symbolism encapsulated within the bell jar imagery is multifaceted and profound.

As previously highlighted in the discussion of Esther as a narrator - her imagery is profoundly rich. I contend that to comprehensively understand the novel's portrayal of mental health through its protagonist Esther, it is crucial to utilize the various interpretations of its titular metaphor. Thus, this chapter will delve into the intricate symbolism of the bell jar, examining its narrative significance and symbolism, ranging from Esther's personal struggle with mental illness to broader societal frameworks. The initial segment of this chapter will employ the concept of 'border narrative' to delve into Esther's inner turmoil, as encapsulated by being trapped under the bell jar. Then, we will explore societal and cultural frameworks; the stringent and harmful expectations put upon Esther within her surroundings, as depicted by the bell jar's grasp, ultimately harming her well-being and sense of self.

4.1.   The Bell Jar: A Border Narrative

In Plath's novel, the prevalent imagery of the bell jar is frequently interpreted as symbolizing the profound consequences of depression – a confining enclosure that isolates and distorts. As posited by Furst in her respective text, as the bell jar descends, the depression encloses Esther (130). Through the theoretical lens of this thesis, Stern's concept of 'border narrative' was delineated. I argue that the imagery of the bell jar embodies a border narrative, signifying the 'crossing of a border' as the bell jar constructs the 'new land' in its entrapment. While Esther is read as a fictional character in this thesis, I posit that this is nevertheless a beneficial approach to understand the way Esther experiences her mental health. This perspective encompasses Esther's efforts to find meaning amid confusion, her loss of functionality and purpose, the profound impact on her perception of existence, and her fascination with death and suicidal tendencies.

First and foremost, I would argue Esther's frequent use of intricate imagery to convey her anguish suggests the complicated nature of mental affliction, reflecting her own struggle to comprehend it, yet also her need to articulate and make sense of it. In the initial chapter, I explained that both Clark and Stern emphasize how experiencing depression is a perplexing ordeal. Stern refers to the narratives she explored in her respective work, where they all share challenges to describe depression in adequate words. Stern describes it as a paradox: "in the midst of describing their depression they recognize that it cannot be captured in language" (97). Similarly, Esther can be seen to grapple with articulating her turmoil when trapped under her bell jar. For instance, in Chapter 9 during a photoshoot for a magazine, Esther is asked to smile, and she begins to sob uncontrollably. Before this she tells us: "I didn't know why I was going to cry, but I knew that if anybody spoke to me or looked at me too closely the tears would fly out of my eyes and the sobs would fly out of the throat and I'd cry for a week" (96). Esther is struggling profoundly, yet she cannot effectively fathom or communicate what is causing her such pain. Like Clark describes, disabled individuals will attempt to construct narratives "in order to make sense of it all, to trace a single self through all these changes" (2). When grappling with mental illness, it is natural to attempt to make sense out of the otherwise disorienting state, most significantly reflected in the construction of the bell jar imagery.

The efforts of Esther to construct meaning is also evident in her attempt to create a trajectory, including establishing a timeline marking her transitions of mental well-being and

illness. Several scholars of Plath's work note the trajectory Esther describes from her father's death to her existence as un-happy, arguably reflecting her attempt to realize when she 'crossed the border'. Esther realizes that she has not been happy since the age of nine, which was when her father passed way, in Chapter 7: "And while Constantin and I sat in one of those hushed auditoriums in the UN, next to a stern muscular Russian girl with no make-up who was a simultaneous interpreter like Constantin, I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (71). Furst, one of the scholars emphasizing this realization, argues: "Esther's depression can be traced to a concentration of factors that extend from her present conflicted position back into her childhood" (135). Contrastingly, Esther also integrates the imagery of the bell jar as she experiences periods of improvement, describing its ascent, evident in the concluding chapters: "All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air" (Plath 206). Therefore, Esther's utilization of the bell jar can be argued to present efforts to establish meaning and a coherent narrative.

As Esther grapples to articulate her anguish, the bell jar serves to figuratively describe her experience with it, depicting it as a prison. In Chapter 14 Esther states: "because wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (178). She is ensnared within the bell jar's grasp when depressed, unable to find contentment, as she feels eternally trapped within its confined, regardless of her physical surroundings. Stern emphasizes the difficulty to articulate the nature of mental illness, however, it is consistently perceived as a "nemesis" and a "thief", that "holds the victim" captive in this land across the border (95). Stern's sentiment resonates with Esther, as she experiences the bell jar as ominous, holding her prisoner, within the confinement of her border narrative.

Furthermore, Esther's experience within the bell jar also marks her deprivation of not only aspirations and interests, but her essential functions. As introduced above, the border narrative is characterized by viewing one's illness as a "thief". According to Stern, inhabiting the new land involves a deterioration, marked by the involuntary loss of energy, motivation, and even basic functions necessary for life (95). In "Sylvia Plath's bell jar of depression: Descent and recovery" (2017), a feature in *The British Jorunal of Psychiatry,* Hannah Marcarian and Paul O. Wilkinson examine Esther's mental afflicition. It argues that Esther's depression stems from a complex interplay of predispoing factors and adverse life events.

Furthermore, her depression leaves her feeling unmotivated, uninterested, ineduqate, disconnected, and devoid of hopeful prospects, thereby ensuring her in a cycle of inexorably leading to feelings of despair. Marcarian and Wilkinson highlight her impaired functions, evident not only in her inabilty to pursue her significant interest of writing, but also in basic needs such as sleeping (15). Marcarian and Wilkinson perspectives pair well with Stern's theories then. As Esther crosses the border, captive in the border narrative of her bell jar, she finds herself stripped not only of her passions, but her basic mechanism to live.

The argument that Esther perceives her mental illnes as stealing her identity and life, a sentiment akin to Stern's border narrative theorizes, is evident in several segments in the novel. For instance, when she seeks help from Doctor Nolan, she expresses her hope that he will assist her, gradually guduing her back to her true self: "And then, I thought, he would help me, step by step, to be myself again" (124). Furthermore, Stern also explains how the conditions and weather in the new terrority of border narratives are potrayed as dark and disorenting, characterized by harsh weather and a disorted sense of exisitng – an 'atemporal' experience where all moments blend together in a hopeless, dark fusion (96-97). I argue that in Esther's narrative, all these characteristics are identifable. Firstly, Esther describes the harsh landscape of her reality at different points in the novel, as for instance as already explored in Chapter 13: "I wondered at what point in space the silly, sham blue of the sky turned black" (151). Secondly, in Chapter 11, her hopeless and atemporal existence is encapsulated:

> I saw the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade. Only for me, the long perspective of shades that set off one box from the next day had suddenly snapped up, and I could see day after day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue (Plath 123).

The quotation above is from when Esther is in Dr. Gordon's waiting room, conveying her despair, hopelessness, and distorted sense of existing. She compares the passage of time with a series of bright, white boxes, while sleep acts as a dividing barrier. However, Esther lacks the respite of sleep that separates the days, leaving her the overwhelming view of an endless and bleak future. She portrays her struggle with mental illness, as she feels trapped in a monotonous and seemingly endless despair.

Esther also becomes fascinated with the morbid when trapped under the bell jar. Stern posits that in a border narrative, "normal life is gone, replaced with a preoccupation with death" (95). Several Plath critics observe Esther's obsession with the macabre. Furst suggests that the combination of Esther's mother forbidding her from attending her father's funeral and failing to aid in her process of grief, along with further emotional neglect, leaves her with a fascination for the morbid and deprived of healthy relationship (135). She argues that the death of Esther's father is "probably one of the sources of her fascination with death in every guise of her narrative. Furst posits that the opening sentence of Esther, referring to Rosenbergs' electrocution, "enounces a theme that will recur in many variations" (135). Thus, we may understand Esther's fascination with darkness as deeply ingrained, woven throughout her narrative, originating from a complex interplay of interpersonal dynamics, unresolved emotions, and more. This arguably underscores the intricate nature of comprehending the various manifestations of mental illness, as discussed initially in this thesis.

Additionally, Esther's fascination with the morbid is apparent in her preoccupation with methods of dying. In accordance, Stern points out how narratives of depression frequently involve a desire for death, leading to serious contemplation, planning, and perhaps even attempted suicide (98). Esther is seen to contemplate various forms of death throughout her narrative and even commits to them at certain points. Marcarian and Wilkinson theorize how "Esther contemplates suicide and describes her attempts in a methodical, matters-of-fact manner, almost as if she does not think they would bother the reader" (15). For instance, in Chapter 13 as explored in the preceding section, Esther initiates the topic of ways to die with Cal. I would suggest another telling example of Esther's preoccupation with death, also shedding light the complexities of her mental struggles, occurs in Chapter 12, when she states:

> But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenceless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at (142).

This passage offers profound insight into Esther's mental health, revealing her inner turmoil, as she grapples with the urge to self-harm or commit suicide, yet ultimately hesitates to act it out. Through the lens of a border narrative, Esther is seen to stand between the desire to die and the longing to survive (Stern 98). Furthermore, it depicts how Esther does not actually perceive death itself as the solution to her struggles, but rather is seeking to rid herself of an

intangible and elusive inner torment – something "a whole lot harder to get at". It is almost as her body serves as a metaphorical bell jar, enclosing her within a prison of her own suffering, as explored in Chapter 13 when she derides her body as a stupid and meaningless cage (153).

Moreover, Esther's obsession with the morbid, as explored in the preceding chapter, exposes the reader to an overwhelmingly, yet natural and palatable dark narrative. Marcarian and Wilkinson suggested that Esther shares her struggles as if she thinks it will not bother the reader. In accordance, Moss posits that the constant exposure to the morbid implies a certain "casualness" of suffering (66). He argues that consequently the reader becomes aware of Esther's profound isolation from sympathy and reality (66). By witnessing the deterioration from a first-person perspective, as underscored an essential function of Esther's narrative, the reader encounters a sense of continuity and natural progression of her descent into madness: "it is not one state suddenly supplanting another but the most gradual of processes" (68). Esther, entrapped by the metaphorical bell jar, symbolizing the crossing of a border into a realm where she is enveloped by a dark reality, mirrors her distorted perceptions presented to the reader.

4.2.   The Bell Jar: The Pressures of Society

The imagery of the bell jar serves not only as an illustration of a 'border narrative' and a depiction of the ramifications of mental illness on an individual, but also as a representation of societal and cultural pressures. These pressures significantly impact Esther's well-being and sense of self. Mahrukh Baig, in "Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar as A Psychological Space" (2014), argues how *The Bell Jar* is "a bitter critique of the 1950s American society that has rules, regulations, double standards and emotional as well as physical constraints on the female" (8). He theorizes that Esther's existence within "a bell-jar of social pressures" leads to her suffocation and fragmentation of self (8). Interestingly, Marjorie G. Perloff in "*The Bell Jar* Relates a Girl's Search for Identity" states: "For Sylvia Plath's focus in *The Bell Jar* is not on mental illness per se, but on the relationship of Esther's private psychosis to her larger social situation (95). Perloff theorizes that illness functions as a metaphor for a sick society in the novel (96). Therefore, a significant and contended perspective of Plath's novel is how it does not solely focus on depicting mental illness in itself, but rather explores Esther as a product of her social context. While I argue Plath's novel and its titular metaphor emphasize mental illness in itself and on an individual level, it is evident that one must examine the

significant part of its portrayal of society. This segment will explore how Esther grapples with the weight of her surroundings and the toll it takes on her mental well-being and identity.

4.2.1. An Individual Amidst Expectations

First and foremost, within the context of exploring Esther as a product of her societal context, is the perspective that we may not exist outside of our societal and cultural norms and regulations. Esther is, whether she likes it or not, subject to her surroundings, and must therefore navigate how to play her part within it. Wagner-Martin intriguingly contends that a female character may not be perceived as an individual entity, but rather as an integral part of her culture. She relates this to Esther's situation:

> Her choice is not to leave that society; escape is not an option. And the women character in her culture faces continuous decisions. Will Esther sympathize with the Rosenbergs? As human beings, they are being killed in a terrible way. They are being violated not only by being killed but by "being burned along their nerves". Yet they have broken rules; they have been traitors to their country. Implicit in the consideration of the Rosenbergs matter is Esther's dilemma - can she break social rules? Can she live the kind of life she wants, regardless of what her culture says? The Rosenbergs are being punished for their disobedience, or perhaps for their difference. What, then, will happen to Esther, who feels herself very different from most of her peers? (29-30).

In the passage above, Wagner-Martin highlights the dilemmas faced by Esther within her societal context - for despite what she may desire, Esther cannot exist outside of society. I would argue Wagner-Martin brings up the execution of the Rosenbergs as a parallel to Esther. The Rosenbergs are condemned by society for breaking its rules and therefore receiving horrible punishment, reflecting Esther's own struggle with societal expectations and its possible ramifications. It questions whether Esther can live authentically, and highlights her sense of alienation, suggesting that she may face repercussions for it.

A key text to bring in our continued reading of the societal and cultural pressures in Esther's narrative is Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Ahmed highlights how society constructs normative paths that individuals must follow to be promised contentment, where deviations result in negative ramifications. Esther can be seen as an 'affect alien', unable to conform to the societal norms and expected affect states. Her failed attempts to do

so, or her awareness of her inability to, leads to her 'anxious narratives'. I would suggest Esther's statement on page 2 of the novel encapsulates this sentiment well: "I was supposed to be having the time of my life". Early on, the reader senses Esther's discontentment and bewilderment. Esther is "supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls", having a wonderful opportunity as an intern for a New York fashion magazine, yet her affect states does not match the expected response. Esther struggles to find her place in the world. Contrasting to different characters who seem to easily form their 'affective communities' and adhere to conformity, Esther remains an outsider in varying settings.

Similar to Ahmed's depiction of contemporary society, I would posit Esther's 1950s society is also depicted as obsessed with the pursuit of happiness. Various characters embody societal and cultural pressures that compel Esther to pursue and display happiness, even if those pursuits or expressions are not authentic to her. Like Ahmed theorizes, happiness functions to become an expectation or almost demand placed on others to satisfy ourselves. As Esther grapples with finding her purpose in life, her surroundings urge her to simply move on and feign authentic happiness while pursuing what they perceive as the right path. One of several scenes that effectively encapsulates the demands put on Esther is in Chapter 12. Esther's mother desires for her to simply be 'happy' and 'normal', joining a normative path of society, overlooking the depth of her struggles and ultimately neglecting her:

> My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.'
> I looked at her. 'Like what?'
> 'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.' She paused. 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again' (140).

In this excerpt, Esther tells her mother about her wish to stop seeing Doctor Gordon. Contrary to her mother's hasty conclusion, Esther's decision is not driven by a sense of wellness and without a need for aid, but rather her dissatisfaction with the treatment. Nevertheless, Esther's mother interprets it as a choice Esther has made - she is 'choosing' to follow what Ahmed coins the promise of happiness. In her mother's eyes, Esther is distancing herself from what I believe Ahmed might label 'troublemakers' in this context - those whom Esther's mother perceives as awful due to their negativity about life and choice to remain unwell and ultimately pass away. Moreover, Esther's mother places significance on the idealization of the 'conventional happy family', as highlighted as an 'happy object' previously in this thesis.

4.2.2. The Patriarchy

Many of the pressures Esther grapples with within the bell jar of societal and cultural pressures can be ascribed to patriarchal influences and the subsequently limited options available to her. A scholar who examines this perspective is Wagner-Martin. She captivatingly posits that "Most of the damage to Esther occurs because of the laws the patriarchal system enforces" (50). She illustrates this by elucidating key action that has harmed Esther - the assault perpetrated by Marco can be attributed to Esther's poor choice in suitors, the medical crisis and lack of empathy exhibited by Iwrin could be assigned to Esther's engagement in premarital intercourse, and furthermore the authoritative demeanor and subsequent harm from individuals like Buddy or Doctor Gordon can be justified in their roles as a potential spouse and a medical professional (50-51). These societal and cultural expectations, ultimately detrimental for women, contribute significantly to Esther's struggles and sense of entrapment.

Moreover, as the bell jar symbolizes the patriarchal landscape for women in the 1950s, women were subjected to strict roles. Baig contends that women were either categorized as virtuous 'Madonnas' or morally tainted 'whores' (9). Baig states: "Plath pictures the devastating effects of such elements experienced by women who are slowly driven insane by the gender stereotypic confines of their social world" (8). Esther finds herself in a clash with the norms of her time, frequently questioning the validity of its framework. For instance, Baig references Chapter 7 of *The Bell Jar,* where Esther encounters the article "Defense of Chastity" (9). I concur that this example from the novel effectively highlights Esther's dismay with the stereotypical gender norms and hypocrisy present in her world. As the article underscores that women are held to different expectations than men and expected to honor the preservation of their virtue, Esther 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" (77). The discord between Esther and the inflexible dictates of society undermines her well-being as well as disrupting her place amongst others.

Esther's dismay as expressed above is mainly fueled by Buddy having slept with another woman, wherein his sexual activity is deemed acceptable, while she as a woman, is subjected to different judgements. I would suggest another example encapsulating this constraining division of women and its subsequent judgements is when Esther experiences assault. When Marco explains to Esther that he is in love with his first cousin, Esther

questions why he is not marrying her, to which he replies: "Impossible", "She's my first cousin. She's going to be a nun". Esther asks if she is beautiful, whereas Marco replies that "There's no one to touch her" (104). The ensuing events depict Marco's physical attack on Esther and his verbal remarks of calling her a slut. As Esther resists his advances and expresses her desire to leave with Doreen, Esther feels as if Marco is talking to himself, uttering: "Sluts, all sluts", "Yes or no, it is all the same" (105).

First and foremost, I would suggest 'sluts' and 'nuns' stand as contrasting labels of women, reflecting the narrow roles women can fit into based on their perceived morality. When Marco idealizes his cousin, he reinforces the traditional gender norm that women's worth is based on their chastity. When Esther asks of her beauty, Marco replies that no one can touch her, suggesting that her purity is what deems her desirable. Furthermore, his assault shows his belief in entitlement to control and dominate women, especially those who do not conform to his idealized image of femininity. He categorizes Esther as a slut, and her acceptance or rejection of his advances do not matter, for she is a stereotype to him - an objectification of a woman as a mere target for his desire. I would posit that Esther's assault represents a profound traumatic event for her, indicating to readers the extent to which her struggle to conform to society's predefined roles for women inflicts significant harm upon her.

4.2.3. 'The Domestic Trap'

This patriarchal system that subjects women to constraining roles, entails the expectations of domesticity. Interestingly, Esther feels distanced and expresses her disdain, stating "Children made me sick" and "I had nothing to look forward to" when confronted with the novel's embodiment of the 'ideal domesticated woman', yet she is intrigued (113). In Chapter 10, Esther observes Dodo Conway as she passes by in a stroller and demonstrates her fascination with this persona:

> Dodo Conway was a Catholic who had gone to Barnard and then married an architect who had gone to Columbia and was also a Catholic. They had a big, rambling house up the street from us, set behind a morbid façade of pine trees, and surrounded by scooters, tricycles, doll carriages, toy fire trucks, baseball bats, badminton nets, croquet wickets, hamster cages and cocker spaniel puppies—the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood (112).

Esther notes how "Everybody loved Dodo", with her seemingly perfect life and ("excessive") nearly seven children (112). I would suggest Esther's complex and critical feelings toward Dodo are rooted in her own struggles and perceptions - Dodo represents the epitome of domesticity - a reality Esther finds suffocating and unattainable. While Esther and Dodo are fictional characters, they mirror the reality that women encountered during this time period. As delineated by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) the mid-20th century entailed an idealization of the devoted housewife, completed with a loving husband, home, and family. Dodo is an embodiment of the proud housewife with the "up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of kids" (24) that Friedan exemplified in work.

Furthermore, Dodo may symbolize what Esther experiences as an insurmountable challenge, entailing the suffocating expectation of domesticity and leaving her feeling as if death is the only viable escape. Moss interestingly posits how Dodo represents Esther's dilemma - not the choice of domesticity or promiscuity as already explored - instead a more hopeless one that furthermore exhibits the lack of freedom: "There seem to be only two solutions, and both involve the invisible: to pledge faith to the unborn or fealty to the dead" (69). What Moss appears to suggest is how Ether is confronted with a binary choice: either committing herself to 'the unborn', symbolizing having children and becoming a housewife, or to 'the dead', representing suicide as she finds the first alternative unbearable. Moss explains how the "monstrous slavery of the seemingly permanent pregnancy of her neighbor Dodo Conway, who constantly wheels a baby carriage [...] like a demented figure in a Greek chorus" portrays a life Esther is unable to accept (69). In this sense, Dodo's presence serves as a haunting reminder of the expectations put upon Esther, highlighting the internal conflict she faces.

Esther arguably finds Dodo so haunting because she associates her with the perceived consequences of conforming to domesticity, a reality she cannot reconcile. In Chapter 6, Esther articulates a telling insight: "So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (81). Esther compares the experience of conforming to societal expectations of domesticity as being 'brainwashed', suggesting that those individuals who do lose their autonomy and critical thinking skills. Like those indoctrinated into a totalitarian regime, these women would live in a state of subjugation in their own home.

In "Metaphors of Madness: Sylvia Plath's Rejection of Patriarchal Language in The Bell Jar" (2019), Stephanie de Villiers explains how society held the "assertion of males as active and progressive, and of women as passive nurtures and caregivers" (4). She refers to Mrs. Willard's statement to her son Buddy: "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (67). Villiers highlights the deeply ingrained notions of where a woman's place should be, restricting them and placing them as compliant partners to their men. Furthermore, I would like to note how Mrs. Willard stands as one of the most prominent female voices in *The Bell Jar,* yet she is not physically present. Her reinforcement of patriarchal values is conveyed through a male (her son), reflecting the lack of agency in women even in the seemingly influential ones.

Within this reality, women were not only expected to be submissive and compliant, but they also lost their creative expression and aspirations for individual success. Villiers argues that the novel portrays a reality where "femininity and creativity are viewed as mutually exclusive" (4). She theorizes that Esther's loss of ability to write reflects the clash of her as a creative female individual in her society (6). Similarly, Baig suggests how "Esther believes that marriage curbs female creativity by giving the man complete control" (9). Interestingly, before the aforementioned reflection on the 'totalitarian' reality, Esther recalls Buddy's assertion that having children would alter her needs: "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more" (81). Esther is an ambitious individual who has diligently pursued her aspirations throughout her life. However, her ambitions conflict with societal expectations regarding her purpose. In the same chapter, Esther her dismay with the portrayal of a domesticated future, arguing it would squander her potential, much like the situation exemplified by Mrs. Willard:

> It would mean getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in my nightgown and curlers after he'd left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively, fascinating day he'd expect a big dinner, and I'd spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself (80).

I would argue the notion that Esther's purpose is to become a housewife and a mother, ultimately leaving her other aspirations behind, resonates deeply with Friedan's analysis. As she elucidated, society portrayed the pinnacle of womanhood as embodying the ideals of femininity, passivity, and respectability, with the core pursuit of a happy family and home life. This societal construct is reinforced by its pervasive influence, as seen in Esther, and furthermore theorized by Ahmed, it exerts significant world-making effects. However, as Esther's experience illustrates, adhering to these expectations is not enough for her. As Friedan suggested, Esther is on a quest for something greater than herself, seeking a meaning. Her struggles to do this in her society have detrimental consequences on her mental health. I would assert Esther embodies Friedan's concept of 'the problem that has no name'. While she is not yet an unhappy housewife, she fears this trajectory prescribed for women will cause her to be one. While Buddy suggests that a traditional future will invariably change her priorities, leading her to abandon her alternative interests, Esther remains skeptical. Friedan theorized that the failure of women to pursue their ambitions and forsake their aspirations, as Buddy and other strong voices in Esther's narrative encourages her to, would be detrimental to their well-being. I would argue Friedan perfectly encapsulated Esther's fear:

> A woman today who has no goal, no purpose, no ambition patterning her days into the future, making her stretch and grow beyond that small score of years in which her body can fill its biological function, is committing a kind of suicide. For that future half-century after the child-bearing years are over is a fact that American women cannot deny. Nor can she deny that as a housewife, the world is indeed rushing past her door while she just sits and watches. The terror she feels is real, if she has no place in the world (272).

In the excerpt above, Friedan constructed similar realities as Esther, where women who have nothing else than their family-lives are left without purpose and meaning. Friedan equated this kind of existence to a 'kind of suicide', a poignant echo of Esther's narrative, as she grapples with self-harm and suicide attempts, perhaps stemming from her inability to reconcile with what Friedan paints a slower future suicide.

4.2.4. The Bell Jar: A Display

As elucidated, the bell jar represents a myriad of concepts integral to Esther's narrative, and consequentially, to her well-being. Among these interpretations, the bell jar's symbolism as a

device for display is particularly intriguing, mirroring society's expectations and demands of female beauty and the resultant toll on mental health. A scholar examining this perspective is Villiers, stating: "Most significantly, perhaps, is the function of the domestic bell jar, which is used to display objects of beauty" (8). Villiers elucidates how a bell jar can serve to draw the attention of bypassers, whereas the pastries that are most visually appealing will be chosen by the consumer. Villiers interestingly makes the parallel:

> If Esther is depicted as living underneath a bell jar, the metaphor of the domestic bell jar implies an invitation of the male gaze as well as pointing to Esther's function as a woman in patriarchal society. She must be beautified and out on display in order to attract the attention of a man who would choose her as a wife and mother to his children (8).

Villiers elucidates how Esther, as a woman, is expected to embody societal notions of beauty. Without these, women are failures, due to their inability to attract a man and secure their future as housewives. This then entails the passive roles of women, inviting the male gaze, and subjecting them to rigid standards of how to look/act. Villiers argues this perspective underscores the suffocation Esther experiences by society, leading to her mental deterioration. I would argue this is also a notion Friedan highlights in her work. She illuminates the pervasive promotion of the idealized woman in media, emphasizing how it portrays the woman as "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content" (23). Interestingly, Esther finds herself interning at a Ladies' Day, that mirrors the media Friedan criticizes, being a superficial magazine focused on appearance, fashion and lifestyle for women. Perhaps a way the novel symbolizes the pervasive influence of this ideal. It is evident that Esther, ensnared by the bell jar's grasp, places significant importance on appearances. An example of Esther's consideration of appearance is suggested when she remarks about her internship superior early on in the novel: "Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't matter" (5). This reflects how Esther puts significant weight on beauty, and if it were not for Jay Cee's success, her lack in appearance would be devastating. Esther's preoccupation with appearances is shown in how Esther continuously scrutinizes and criticizes others' appearances as well as being very aware of her own.

A scene that I would argue encapsulates Esther's preoccupation with her own appearance very effectively follows her grave suicide attempt. Esther requests to see a mirror

from her nurse and despite the nurse's initial hesitation, Esther persists in her desire to see herself:

> 'Why can't I?
>
> 'Because you better not.' The burse shut the lid of the overnight case with a little snap.
>
> 'Why?'
>
> 'Because you don't look very pretty.'
>
> 'Oh, just let me see.'
>
> [Nurse gives Esther a mirror]
>
> You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. one side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at either corner.
>
> The most startling things about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors.
>
> I smiled.
>
> The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin (168).

I would argue the significance of Esther breaking the mirror in this scene lies in her confrontation with her own appearance and the societal notions of beauty. The nurse is reluctant to let Esther see herself due to her appearance, reflecting the belief that Esther will be distraught to see herself. Esther is however too curious, putting a lot of emphasis on how she looks, and convinces the nurse to grant her a mirror. When Esther sees herself, she is confronted with a distorted version of herself, due to her injuries from her attempt. Interestingly, this narration presents the reader with the task of dissecting Esther's description against the actual action - a challenge that may recur with Esther as a narrator as previously explored. Esther describes the mirror cracking as she smiles, yet it becomes apparent that she most likely broke the mirror on purpose. Especially following the nurses' dismay and Esther remark: "Anybody could drop a mirror. I didn't see why they should get so stirred up" (168). Esther's choice of retelling reveals a great deal. While there lie various interpretations, I would argue the shattered mirror, as described as broken by its own accord rather than Esther's deliberate action, serves as a symbol of the discord between Esther's appearance and

the societal beauty norms. As Esther smiles, it breaks, suggesting a manifestation of this profound clash. Furthermore, I would posit the significance of Esther being the force that breaks the mirror implies how it is individuals ultimately internalizing and further enabling rigid standards, although it may appear out of their control and in the hands of an external force - being society. A problematic notion contended by Friedan and discussed previously: "A mystique does not compel its own acceptance" (146).

4.2.5. 'The Fig Tree'

Finally, the confinement of the bell jar on Esther and her mental affliction causes her to have little sense of who she is and what her future may entail. Moss captivatingly states: Afraid of distorting the person she is yet to become, Esther becomes the ultimate distortion - nothing" (66). Moss suggests that Esther is deeply conflicted between societal roles, leaving her unable to embrace any identity or future life, ultimately leading her to forfeit life itself. Similarly, Wagner-Martin states how Esther "has little identity". "She is confused, and whether her name is Elly or Elaine or Esther, she remains a disturbed - and distorted - young woman" (74). Wagner-Martin refers to the various identities Esther constructs for herself, moreover the way Esther does not fit into the categories the surrounding characters like the rebellious and sexual Doreen or the respectable and sweet Betsy. Esther is pressured by the society's limited roles, yet "she cannot fit into her culture in an identifiable way, even if that means she is limited to stereotypes, Esther has failed - and that failure is her fault" (74). Esther is perpetually pressured by her surroundings, yet she finds herself incapable of conforming to them. I contend that the metaphor of 'the fig tree' in Plath's novel harmonizes with the interpretation of the bell jar in this chapter – symbolizing the various options available to Esther and their decay as she remains ensnared within her bell jar unable to follow any branch.

Thus, a pivotal metaphor frequently referenced by scholars, highlighting its importance, is the fig-tree in *The Bell Jar*, appearing most noticeably in Chapter 7:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.
> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names

and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet (73)

I argue the fig-tree metaphor encapsulates Esther's struggle to define her identity and choose a path in life, furthermore, her distress of what may happen if she is never able to. Villiers explores this metaphor, interestingly stating: "the fig tree is representative of Esther's inability to reconcile her creativity with normative ideas of the feminine, and furthermore, the metaphor also represents a loss of selfhood" (9). Villiers introduces the perspective that the fig not only symbolizes Esther's foregrounded trajectories in life and the pressures to choose one, but also signifies the consequences of her stagnation - failure to reconcile her choices may result in further mental health deterioration, mirroring the decay of the tree (9).

Then, we may understand the possibilities presented to Esther are symbolized by the various figs, however, the pressure to select just one fig represents Esther's internal conflict, leading the figs to wither and fall to the ground. Esther categorizes the figs as representing various potential futures, with the first one notably depicting a path of becoming a housewife and mother, a reality she feels especially pressured by – as suggested by the notion of 'the feminine mystique'. Additionally, she remarks that some figs are indistinctive, hinting at the existence of more options than she can presently envision. As Esther struggles to select a fig, the tree withers. I would argue this represents the gradual disappearance of her potential future as she ages and as suggested by Villiers her worsening mental state as with further emphasis of her lack of direction.

Furthermore, I would theorize that the fig-tree metaphor further reflects Friedan's perspectives, as she contended how 'the feminine mystique' wielded such significant power that it obscured the desires and capacities neglected in women. Moreover, fostering a society where questioning one's identity was not only permitted, but encouraged (53). As Esther feels anxiety imagining this fig-tree, whereas some directions of the figs are not even visible to her, it is shown she is grappling with the reality delineated by Friedan. Esther finds it very difficult to discover her identity within a world that adheres to normative paths and stereotypical notions

of womanhood. Friedan further highlights how women would encounter challenges to commit to pursuits beyond their predefined narratives and would experience distress when confronted about their true desires in life. Similarly, Esther does not maintain her confidence or is able to acknowledge her own needs. Finally, I also wish to draw the significant parallel to Ahmed's theories, as she too elucidates the pressure to follow an emphasized and normative path in her concept of 'the promise of happiness', whereas alternative narratives may become obscure.

4.3. Trapped under the Bell Jar: Concluding Remarks

The multifaceted symbolism of the bell jar demonstrates the figurative depth of Esther's narration and captivatingly portrays the sense of entrapments she experiences throughout her narrative. Firstly, this entrapment may be explored through the lens of 'border narrative' theory, highlighting her anguish as depressed. Esther grapples with her mental health and struggles to comprehend it. Trapped within the bell jar, she paints a picture of it as a prison that steals her vitality and identity, replacing her reality with a distorted and dark existence. Secondly, the bell jar symbolizes the constraining forces of society. Esther is forced to navigate her place in a world that imposes rigid expectations on young women, including gendered hypocrisy, expectations of compliance, pressures of domesticity, and beauty standards. Feeling adrift amidst this confusing and controlling world, she grapples with finding her purpose and direction in life, having major ramifications on her well-being.

5. Breaking the Bell Jar

Having explored the symbolism of the bell jar as a confining enclosure, it is now opportune to break free from its constraints. As elucidated, the bell jar may serve as a nuanced metaphor for depression - a complex and profound affliction, whose origins may intricately intertwine with societal and cultural frameworks. While I argue *The Bell Jar* (1663) offers a captivating and complex portrayal of mental health, as previously evidenced by the exploration of Esther's narration and the depth of the entrapment of the bell jar metaphor, the novel transcends representation of the somber depths of depression and the intricate societal issues it entails. While the bell jar symbolizes the ominous descent into the confining enclosure of depression, it may simultaneously illustrate the potential for recovery in its ascent, along with the opportunity to confront what was once hidden. To present this argument, this chapter will be divided into two main sections, each addressing what I consider to be a crucial reflection on mental health from *The Bell Jar* to carry forward with us: firstly, the complexity of mental health and the important insights derived from it, epitomized by the enigmatic conclusion of the novel and the multifaceted bell jar metaphor. Secondly, the potential for a textual community represented within *The Bell Jar* and the lessons it imparts, portrayed by Esther's search for connection and belonging.

5.1. The Bell Jar Rising

All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air (Plath 206).

The image of the ominous bell jar descending and enclosing also encompasses the hope of its ascent. As articulated by Furst: "In a movement initially downward and later upward, the novel shows Esther's imprisonment under the bell jar and her eventual liberation from it" (130). As explored in the preceding chapter, Esther frequently employs the bell jar as a symbol for being ensnared in her own mental turmoil and the constraints surrounding her. As the bell jar descends upon her, she feels trapped in despair. However, as Esther's mental health improves toward the ending of her narrative, it becomes evident that the bell jar may release her. The centrality of this concept is underscored by its recognition by several Plath scholars. Yet, I would argue that the ambiguity of the ending leaves the reader uncertain about its implications. The suggestion that the bell jar might represent a curative imagery, ambiguous and complex, is pivotal in what I propose to be a meaningful interpretation of the

novel. First and foremost, in this chapter, I will delve into this notion by doing a reading of the novel's ambiguous ending and engaging with the fascinating reflections of Lilian R. Furst and Caroline King Barnard. Following that, I will delve deeper into Esther's mental health journey, examining her path towards self-discovery, acceptance, and negotiation with past and future.

5.1.1. The Ambiguous Ending

Approaching the conclusion of *The Bell Jar*, it appears that Esther might be progressing towards improved mental health, with the symbolic bell jar potentially loosening its grip on her. The opening passage that has been briefly introduced before in this chapter is taken from Chapter 18 of the novel, a significant moment, where Esther describes the bell jar's finally briefly releasing her. In this chapter, Esther finds herself in Belsize which she labels as "the best house of all", for "From Belsize people went back to work and back to school and back to their homes" (196). Initially, Esther is resistant to being moved to Belsize. She perceives herself as not being "well enough" to be relocated to a place she deems is reserved for the women who are well along the road to recovery. Nevertheless, she discerns a silver lining - she may put the fear of shock treatments behind her, as she believes women at Belsize seldom undergo such procedures.

Interestingly, the narrative shifts in its solely negative portrayal of electroconvulsive therapy, as the description of the bell jar's release follows Esther's shock treatment. The procedure is depicted as being administered successfully by Doctor Nolan, whom Esther puts a lot of faith in. I would posit the way Esther describes the bell jar in the initial excerpt evokes vivid imagery, as the reader envisions the bell jar hovering over her, finally granting her some "fresh, blue-skied" air to her as she is standing outside with Doctor Nolan. Esther is experiencing a newfound sense of liberation and hope for her recovery. By being transferred to Belsize and showing signs of improvement, particularly with the symbolic release of the bell jar's grip, it is suggested to the reader that Esther may be on the path toward discharge.

Then, toward the last pages of *The Bell Jar*, Esther is to undergo a review by her doctors to determine if she is ready to be discharged from the institution. Feeling uncertain about the doctors' impending decision and her own level of recovery, Esther reflects: "I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead - after all, I had been 'analyzed'. Instead, all I could see were question marks" (233).

However, Doctor Nolan continues to be a supportive figure to Esther, reassuring her that everything will be alright. The very last page of the novel describes Esther stepping into the boardroom:

> Pausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor who had told me about the rivers and the Pilgrims on my first day, and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks. The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by magical thread I stepped into the room (234).

Numerous scholars examine the enigmatic ending of the novel, contemplating its implications for Esther's future trajectory. Among them is Caroline King Barnard, who suggests that Esther's narrative depicts a process of renewal, signaling a positive journey towards recovery and the forging of her identity. Barnard states:

> Thus renewed, Esther awaits her expected dismissal from the hospital. She has been, as she puts it, "born twice - patched, retreaded and approved for the road." The reader may safely assume that Esther's recovery is complete. Her prognosis seems good; the "new, normal personality" with which she now meets the world may well be sufficiently strong to resist future breakdown. Indeed, at the time when she actually tells this story, Esther is someone's wife and the mother of a baby; she is, she says, "all right", and she uses some of the free gifts from her chaotic summer in New York as toys for her child (81).

Barnard, in the excerpt above, refers to Esther's own reflections. Esther's portrayal of herself and her journey suggests that she perceives the doctors' confidence in her, and although she harbors insecurities about her own mental health and recovery, she also hints at having some hope. Furthermore, Barnard intriguingly suggests that at the time of recounting her story, Esther may be someone's wife and mother (80-81). Barnard does not elaborate on the specific reasoning of her interpretation, but this is a theory also shared by other scholars. Furst posits in her examinations that:

> Although the narrative is predominantly reminiscent in its mode of confiding self-exploration, one striking flash-forward occurs right near the beginning when Esther mentions having 'cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with' (3). Evidently she has a child and presumably has got married (Furst 142).

In the quotation above, Furst notes that the majority of *The Bell Jar* seems to reflect on past events. As explored in previously in this thesis, Esther as a narrator is not straightforward, often alternating between different time periods, without much clarification offered to the reader. The significant flash-forward Furst refers to seems to suggest Esther may have a child at the time of her retelling. Furthermore, Furst points out the "imaginativeness of the prose" in the novel as supportive of Esther's aspirations of becoming a writer (142). As I have examined previously in the preceding chapters, Esther utilizes abundant and unique imagery in her narration. Furst states how "the novel is studded with memorable phrases that brilliantly capture Esther's moods and apprehensions" (143). Furst, likewise Barnard, posits that the conclusion of the novel, albeit open-ended, depicts a positive direction. She underscores that the potential promise of Esther's future should not be underestimated. Furst observes how Esther is "a very different young woman" at the ending of the novel (142). It is evident that Esther has undergone significant growth by the end of her narrative compared to the depictions at the beginning.

The opening page of *The Bell Jar* introduces us to a protagonist who expresses, "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (1). Conversely, the final pages depict Esther entering the boardroom, where the doctors' eyes turn to her as she steps in (234). Initially, Esther expresses her uncertainty about her purpose, lost in the bustling city of New York, and her fascination with an electrocution - so profound that it features prominently in her opening sentence. Wagner-Martin states: "She is ill, mentally upset, depressed, lost in the unusual experience of being in New York on a scholarship, and yet obsessed (by her own admission) with the Rosenberg execution" (25). Then, at the conclusion of the novel, Wagner-Martin contends "The Esther Greenwood pictures in the later pages of *The Bell Jar* is a much more confident person" (42). I concur with this perspective, as Esther undergoes a notable transformation, emerging as a more confident individual. This may seem contradictory, given her expressed uncertainty about her well-being and the impending decision of her doctors'. Yet, the contrast lies in her acknowledgment of this uncertainty and her courage in entering that room. In that pivotal moment, she exhibits agency and crosses a significant threshold, both literally and figuratively.

5.1.2. Self-Discovery and Acceptance

The preceding chapter explored the significant struggles Esther faces throughout her narrative - both in navigating a society characterized by rigid constraints on women that fail to resonate with Esther and in grappling with her well-being as a mentally ill individual. I would suggest fitting to this then, is how Esther's path against possible recovery must involve self-discovery and acceptance. I would contend a fundamental aspect of reading Esther's ending as a mental health journey involves delving into her process of growth, encompassing the forging of her own identity and her path towards embracing herself. Perloff, Barnard, and Wagner-Martin present intriguing theories regarding Esther's experience with renewal and development of a newfound sense of self.

Several scholars elucidate how Esther's narrative encompasses a form of 'rebirth', symbolized in the aftermath of her suicide attempt. For instance, Perloff intriguingly states that Esther, "Having passed through death", is not able "to forge a new identity" in her examination (98). Barnard is among the critics who delve into this notion further, in my opinion, in a particularly interesting manner - she posits that Esther has reverted back to a state akin to "infancy" following her suicide attempt, requiring as well as enabling her to recover and discover herself authentically. Barnard notes that "Esther slowly constructs for herself a new and better-integrated personality" (77). She elucidates how Esther has been rigorously subjected to a world and to people who have sought to mold her in a certain way, leading to a state of disconnection and confusion. This concept was underscored in the preceding chapter and theorized to have significant consequences on Esther's mental health. However, according to Barnard, now, Esther "learns to free herself from the tyranny of others' expectations. Helpless to act even defensively during the days immediately following her suicide attempt, she has no choice but to appear exactly as she is" (77). As Esther is compelled both by her current disabled condition, and by her own agency, she realizes that she must create her own self.

However, Esther's path towards creating herself is not simple and she does not have all the answers. Perloff describes how at the end of the novel, Esther "still sees the future as a series of 'question marks'. Nevertheless, she has learned something very important (99). Perloff is one of the scholars who emphasize how significant Esther's development of self is for her narrative. She suggests that "she has not found a lover nor her future vocation - but she can now view that situation differently" (98). I find Perloff's statement intriguing, for

traditional narratives may often conclude with less ambiguity, perhaps featuring 'happy endings', where the protagonist discovers true love or purpose. Yet, for Esther, uncertainties persist - her fate remains as unclear for her as it does to the reader. I believe Perloff's argument highlights the insignificance of a conclusive ending, as she posits that Esther has discovered something far more profound. Esther is no longer desperate for identities to adopt, nor overwhelmed and disconnected from the world around, she is beginning to embrace it all. As suggested, while some scholars or readers may interpret her narrative as hinting at the conclusion of motherhood, Esther's whole story remains unwritten, leaving open the possibility for her to cave out an authentic future for herself, whatever that may be.

As Esther learns that she must define herself on her own terms, rather than attempting to adhere to the expectations of the world and the people around her, she gains the ability to dismantle the figurative bell jar entrapping her. Several critics suggest that Esther's more authentic responses to those around her are indicative of her recovery and development of self. Although there are many fascinating scenes that arguably reflect this, a key scene occurs in the last chapter, when Esther is visited by Buddy. Buddy is a pivotal character that highlights Esther's struggles with her relationships, making it fitting for this connection to be a developing aspect of the narrative. Both Barnard and Wagner-Martin discuss said scene in their respective works, arguing that Esther's reaction to Buddy showcases her growth and indicates that she no longer hides, but genuinely experiences her emotions.

Wagner-Martin argues that "freed to feel that emotion, of whatever kind", Esther can face Buddy with nuanced and attuned feelings when he visits her. She is even able to correct him when he makes assumptions (79). I would argue Buddy has throughout Esther's narrative either been idolized or demonized, moreover he has exerted control over her. Therefore, I would posit this development is particularly significant. Similarly, Barnard highlights Esther's ability to laugh at Buddy when he comes to visit her (79). Barnard explains how she is secure enough to express her authentic emotions and responses, breaking free from the barriers that have confined her. Esther is able to have "outward-directed and spontaneous" reactions. Furthermore, Barnard interestingly elucidates that while Esther's narrative has always been infused with humor, it has never been expressed in quite this manner (80). As explored, Esther's narration is imbued with a dark humor, making it particularly significant for Esther to genuinely laugh in this manner. When Buddy wonders if it is something about him that "*drives* women crazy", Esther states how "I couldn't help myself, I burst out laughing" (229) - a significant response, as it demonstrates emotional liberation, assertiveness, and an

acceptance and understanding of her own mental state. As explored initially in this thesis, Sarah Ahmed in her *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) suggest that finding values in each affectation and experience, reconsidering our imposed connotations, invites a more multifaceted, authentic, and healthy state of existing. I believe Esther embodies this perspective, as she finds freedom being able to break free from the alienation from herself and start living authentically.

5.1.3. 'Burying Your Old Self'

I contend a pivotal scene highlighting Esther's journey toward self-discovery and acceptance, breaking free from the bell jar's hold, and reconciling with her own existence, is found in the burial of Joan. Burial functions as a literary device frequently employed in literature, effectively evoking emotions in readers, carrying connotations fitting to themes such as death, closure, rebirth, and transformation. The burial of none other than Joan serves as a particularly pronounced scene. Joan, often regarded as a literary double to Esther by scholars such as Wagner-Martin, playing a significant role in her narrative. Joan's death may appear to defy a curative narrative, and according to Wagner-Martin it "stuns the reader", as she has seemed to be a more fortunate Esther on the path of recovery (69). Nonetheless, her burial arguably does not serve as a rejection of recovery; instead, it symbolizes Esther's complex path toward growth and healing.

The scene of Joan's funeral appears toward the very last pages of the novel, suggesting its significance as pivotal to Esther's future. Preceding the paragraph that introduces Joan's funeral, Esther concludes the previous one with the reflection: "I was perfectly free" (232). This follows Esther's concluding interaction with Irwin, which leaves her feeling relieved. This interaction is considered a crucial closing episode, akin to the funeral itself, respectively by both Barnard and Wagner-Martin. Furthermore, I would suggest it is no coincidence that Esther declares herself free just before the funeral segment. Perhaps it is to declare she has liberated herself from past constraints and is preparing to bury a past version of herself. In the subsequent paragraph, Esther begins by explaining Joan's parents had invited her to her funeral, further stating "all during the simple funeral service I wondered what I was burying" (232). This statement bears significance, as Esther implies that the act of burial carries symbolic weight - Joan may not solely be what is being buried. As explored before, fitting to Esther's narration style, the following descriptions are vividly depicted. The concluding sentences of the paragraph hold particular strength. Esther reflects:

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.

I am, I am, I am (233)

The pivotal symbolism of Joan's burial lies in the perspective that it is not solely Joan who is being laid to rest, but rather a part of Esther herself. Barnard states that "Joan's death affords Esther another opportunity to exercise her new perspective". She theorizes that Joan represents an old version of Esther, one that was not able to "identify the source of her oppression". Esther deems Joan as a reminder of what she once was and "Joan's burial, then, signifies an aspect of Esther's new freedom, for what Esther buries at Joan's funeral is part of her old, captive self" (80). I understand Barnard as suggesting how Joan's death serves as a catalyst for Esther's continued process of growth. She symbolizes an earlier version of Esther, unable to understand nor confront herself. By burying her, Esther metaphorically lays to rest the part of her old self that was constrained, enabling her to move on to discover and accept herself.

Furthermore, the scene of the burial functions as a moment for Esther to assert her existence. Similarly to Barnard, Wagner-Martin theorizes how Joan's funeral becomes a scene that emphasizes Esther's agency and understanding of herself: "She attends Joan's funeral not only with sorrow but with the affirmation of her own power of selfhood" (79). Esther's experience at Joan's funeral is, according to Wagner-Martin, not only marked by grief, but recognition of her own identity and symbol of her continuing journey. Wagner-Martin further theorizes that Esther leaving the mental health institution becomes "her new birth ritual" (79). sorrow but with the affirmation of her own power of selfhood" (79). Esther's experience at Joan's funeral is, according to Wagner-Martin, not only marked by grief, but recognition of her own identity and symbol of her continuing journey. Wagner-Martin further theorizes that Esther leaving the mental health institution becomes "her new birth ritual" (79). Wagner-Martin emphasizes Esther's affirmation of selfhood, in her repetition of "I am" at the conclusion of Joan's burial scene, that I find especially symbolic.

I contend that the final sentence of the funeral segment is a compelling part of the novel's end, underscoring Esther's journey toward self-discovery and acceptance. Interestingly, despite its brevity, the statement carries immense meaning. In this moment, Esther listens to her own heart, declaring "I am". I would suggest she acknowledges her own presence, embracing her own existence and asserting her identity. She affirms her vitality, yet with its "old brag", a sense of history and resilience is suggested - perhaps symbolizing the enduring

strength and fragility of mortality as well. Esther is undoubtedly a character in touch with these themes more than most. Furthermore, a heart, like a burial, carries undeniable emotional connotations. The "I am, I am, I am" repetitions mimic a beating heart. It is worth noting that Esther's heart also exclaims "I am, I am, I am" after attempting to swim so far out she would drown in Chapter 13, a moment previously examined when discussing Esther's narration style. I would suggest this repetition strengthens the portrayal of her enduring heart, persisting with its beats "doomed like a dull motor" as she paddles on (152).

5.1.4. Buried, but not Forgotten

Building upon the preceding significance of Esther's burial of her past self and her affirmation of her present existence, I would assert that this should not be mistaken for Esther merely leaving her past behind. Rather, I suggest that the bell jars ascent encompasses the notion of Esther finding peace and insight in her past struggles. As elucidated throughout the chapters of this thesis, having experienced mental illness ultimately changes an individual. Although potentially devastating, this does not necessarily entail only negative implications. Esther's trajectory is undoubtedly a challenging one to digest, yet the conclusion may leave the reader with hope. Wagner-Martin even states in her book: "There is no question that Plath intended to create a thoroughly positive ending for Esther's narrative" (79). I would argue a pivotal aspect to how readers may recognize Esther's progression toward recovery, despite the absence of complete confidence or assurance in a curative outcome, resides in the strength of having her discover an authentic self - a self that does not simply reject past afflictions, but reconciles and finds nuanced and uncertain truths.

As accounted for in the theoretical lens, depression may serve as a teacher, offering insight into oneself and prompting a different perspective on life, which is not inherently negative, although we might be quick to make those assumptions (Stern 99). Stern states that "confidence in one's own stability and consistency is vulnerable thereafter, yet belief in one's ability to cope and overcome is strengthened" (103). I would argue this is relevant for Esther. She does harbor hope for the future and herself, yet she simultaneously feels insecure about her ability to succeed and fears potential setbacks after her possible release. Furthermore, Stern theorizes the shift that may occur to overcome mental health conditions, a kind of negotiation and understanding of the self and one's affliction. She states: "The revised story embraces depression as part of the self - a perceptual shift that occurs" (100). I would suggest Esther embraces this shift. While her mental turmoil has inflicted significant damage, her

reflections towards the conclusion of the novel hint a changed attitude and deep personal growth. Circling back to Radden's concepts of 'symptom-alienating' and 'symptom-integrating' frameworks from the theoretical lens - it appears that Esther has come to perceive depression not solely as an external adversary, but rather as an internal aspect of herself she must find a way to live with.

The notion of coming to terms with one's own illness becomes evident in the last Chapter of *The Bell Jar*:

> We'll take up where we left off, Esther', she had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile.
> 'We'll act as if all this were a bad dream.'
> A bad dream.
> To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.
> A bad dream.
> I remembered everything.
> I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig-tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds i gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a grey skull.
> Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover them.
> But they were part of me. They were my landscape (227).

The passage above shows Esther's vivid recollection of her traumatic experiences, emphasizing all that she has gone through, underscoring that she cannot simply dismiss her past as a mere "bad dream". Esther's experiences have become ingrained in her memory and identity, therefore shaping her perception of the world around her - it is her "landscape". Despite the possibility and hope of time lessening her trauma's impact, Esther acknowledges that it will remain a part of her nevertheless, akin to the landscape being covered by a "kind snow".

I find Wagner-Martin's reflections deeply fruitful to this perspective. She argues as mentioned how the newfound Esther is "free to feel". She can feel numerous and nuanced feelings, as a complex individual. Wagner-Martin states:

Plath is careful to emphasize that Esther cannot simply forget the past: everything that has happened to her has had great meaning, and she has learned from all those experiences, no matter how unpleasant. Knowledge is never abstract, and the person grows from the daily trials of experience (78-79).

I believe Wagner-Martin, in tune with the concept of renegotiation and acceptance, argues how Esther's past and knowledge are integral parts of the self. She emphasizes that despite Esther's negative experiences, everything that has occurred has been influential and key to her development. *The Bell Jar* may reflect how growth is not linear, and individuals are constantly evolving.

Conclusively, in the context of self-discovery and acceptance, Esther emerges as a distinctive protagonist navigating societal and mental health challenges. In a society constructed of societal constraints and imposed ideals on women, embracing an authentic self poses significant challenges. As illuminated by *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) women were expected to conform to predetermined molds and ignore their unfulfillment. However, emphasized by Friedan, true fulfillment may only be attained by discovering one's own source of contentment. Perloff underscores in her work: "The hardest thing in the world to do - and it is especially hard when one is young, female, and highly gifted, is simply to be oneself (99). Esther's journey of self-discovery and acceptance serves as a central narrative thread. As elucidated in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), challenging societal frameworks can lead to judgment and scrutiny. Interestingly, Ahmed also highlights how unbearable events are bound to happen in our lives and that recovery might entail to "re-cover" - "to cover the causes of pain and suffering" (216). However, she refers to philosopher Rosi Braidotti, that argues "paradoxically, it is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation" (Ahmed 216 [Braidotti 14]). I would suggest Esther's refusal to merely conform and dismiss her past as simply a "bad dream", despite the pressures to do so, are pivotal in understanding her as a unique and compelling protagonist grappling with her mental health.

5.1.5. The Bell Jar Rising, but not Departed

Finally, I would contend a significant function of the novel's ambiguous ending and symbolism of the bell jar never fully disappearing lies in the reflection it prompts - mental

health recovery is seldom linear. While some readers might miss a completed curative resolution for the protagonist, I believe it is crucial that Esther's fear of the bell jar descending again remains and how the reader may never know if it did. Esther states: "How did I know that someday - at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere - the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (230). In this passage, Esther reflects on the persistent fear of experiencing another relapse of mental illness, represented by the metaphorical bell jar. Although various scholars of *The Bell Jar* suggest the positive conclusion to the novel, while ambiguous, Esther's uncertainty about when or where the bell jar might descend again reflects the pervasive anxiety and unpredictability associated with mental illness.

This returns us to the idea of the border narrative. As I mention earlier, Barnard argues for the possible positive direction of Esther's trajectory. She also underscores that: "There is, however, a note of warning also sounded at the novel's close" (81). Barnard elucidates, in alignment with my view, how Esther sees a retreaded tire as more likely to come apart than a new one, asking herself how she can be confident the bell jar will not reappear (81). Bringing us back to the concept of the border narrative, as I present earlier in this thesis, in that once you have crossed the boundary, even if you manage to return, there remains the fear and risk of crossing once again. As stated by Stern: "the belief that once one has visited the other side of the border the knowledge that another trip is always a possibility is ever present" (Stern 103).

The symbolism of the bell jar as rising but not departed and Esther's subsequent anxiety is rooted in reality. There is ample data showing that individuals who have experienced depressive episodes or other similar mental illnesses are unfortunately likely to fall victim to them again. For example, a study from the National Center of Biotechnology Information from 2020 explored the recurrence of major depressive disorder in individuals who have previously experienced it. It indicated that there is indeed a significant likelihood of recurrence, specifically in this study, it found that about 60% who had experienced a first episode of MDD would experience a recurrence within two years, and this likelihood would increase with each subsequent episode (National Library of Medicine/NIH).

Therefore, I would argue a key consequence of the absence of Esther narrating a complete recovery or a fully optimistic future is not a reader's potential disappointment or bewilderment. Rather, the ambiguous ending and the bell jar serve to remind us of an important reflection. It intricately demonstrates the complex nature of mental health.

Furthermore, I would suggest that it may resonate more deeply with individuals grappling with mental health challenges, as they, like Esther, may experience fear of relapse. Perhaps narratives lacking this complexity alienate individuals grappling with their mental health, making them feel like their experience is unhopeful. Also, it may remind those who have not been affected by such afflictions the complicated nature of recovery amongst those inflicted. Marcarian and Wilkinson stated that "*The Bell Jar* is a very powerful and believable description of depression, which will be recognized by those who have been affected and enlighten those who have not" (15). I recognize the uncertainty of the ending functions as a pivotal factor contributing to this perspective.

5.2. Textual Community

Transitioning to what I consider the second significant reflection to carry forward with us in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: the potential for a textual community within the novel, and the lessons it imparts, illuminated by Esther's search for connection and belonging. Rose Miyatsu's insights are pivotal in this regard, uniquely intertwining Sara Ahmed's theories with Plath's novel in her work "Hundreds of People Like Me': A Search for a Mad Community in *The Bell Jar*" (2018). Miyatsu contextualizes her reading of *The Bell Jar* within today's prevalent emphasis on happiness, problematizing the how the compulsion towards positive affect can legitimize oppression and favor specific lifestyles (51). As foregrounded initially in this thesis: if we designate exclusive paths to happiness, we consequently constrain alternative modes of coexistence. Miyatsu asks in her exploration what happens to those individuals who choose not to or cannot adhere to the foregrounded emphasis on positivity - she suggests a productive means to explore how we may "leave no one behind" is looking to literature, like *The Bell Jar* (52). I contend utilizing Miyatsu's aim is crucial in her pursuit of 'breaking' the bell jar.

Firstly, within this section I will explore Esther's community building endeavors as represented in her narrative as inspired by Miyatsu's approach. Secondly, I will argue what insights can be gained in these representations. These insights encompass the complexities of seeking community as a mentally ill individual, particularly in the focus of being female, and the potential that resides within literature to foster connection and comfort. Furthermore, the importance of destigmatizing and promoting openness and connection among those disabled in society.

5.2.1. Esther's Community Building Endeavors

As previously discussed, Esther emerges as a protagonist grappling with the challenge of defining her identity and finding her place in the world. Discussed in the preceding chapter, this struggle is particularly evident for Esther, as she exists in a society with rigid and constraining norms, that he is unable and unwilling to successfully adhere to. Introduced in the theoretical lens, it becomes apparent that the emphasis placed on happiness in our societal constructs may marginalize individuals like Esther, leaving them excluded and disconnected. Miyatsu argues that Esther is compelled to seek out "places that will accept her and where she can belong" (56). She theorizes that Esther pursues her search through three primary avenues: in textual representations/'scandal sheets', in institutions, and in the mental hospital she is admitted to. I find these three distinctive methods useful when exploring Esther's community endeavors.

Firstly, Esther attempts to find solace in textual representation. Miyatsu suggest that as Esther is unable to find is "unable to deny her pain and act the cherry part that everyone apparently expects of her, Esther begins to look for examples of other people who are in mental distress" (56). What Miyatsu theorizes then, is how Esther's unmet need for support and kinship in her life drives her to seek solace in textual representations of individuals who share her struggles. Miyatsu illustrates Esther's pursuit of textual community by referencing a scene in which Esther readers an article about a man attempting suicide but being saved, and another about a girl who successfully committed suicide. Miyatsu suggest that Esther is deeply intrigued by these cases; however, as the stories end without positive resolution or answers, her sense of despair and loneliness intensifies (57).

Esther's fascination of the morbid can then be explored as not only being a consequence of her mental illness, but also as a strategy to find solace. In the previous chapter, Esther's fixation on morbidity was examined, suggesting that individuals dealing with mental illness often gravitate toward dark subjects. While it was previously theorized, particularly by theories of Stern, that depression consumes one's view of life and identity, it can be understood as a method to find connection in affliction as well. As experiences outside the norms of society are excluded, mental illness becomes particularly lonely, and like Esther, individuals may seek out connection and comfort through narratives featuring people struggling too. Esther states that: "Everything I had ever read about mad people stuck in my mind, while everything else flew out" (149).

As mentioned, two significant instances of Esther attempting to find answers in textual representation lies in the example of George Polluci, the man who was saved from a suicide attempt in Chapter 11, and the woman who had died from suicide in Chapter 12. When looking at the picture of the deceased woman, Esther says:

> I brought it up next to the smudgy photograph of the dead girl. It matched, mouth for mouth, nose for nose. The only difference was the eyes. The eyes in the snapshot were open, and those in the newspaper photograph were closed. But I knew if the dead girl's eyes were to be thumbed wide, they would look out at me with the same dead, black, vacant expression as the eyes in the snapshot (140-141).

Esther finds herself identical to the deceased woman's photograph - their mouths, noses, and even eyes if they were open, are according to Esther the same between them. I argue Esther's comparison to the woman, finding a striking resemblance, emphasizes her anguish. I suggest the reason Esther deeply relates to the woman is because she finds a type of validation or recognition in the image of someone who has succumbed to their mental illness. It may reflect Esther's own struggles and feelings of hopelessness. Similarly, the man who attempted to kill himself - Esther tells us he had something crucial to tell her and "whatever it was might just be written on his face" (131). This may indicate Esther's search for understanding and insight into her own condition. Alienated in a society and in relationships she is disconnected, she grapples with finding meaning.

Secondly, Esther entertains the idea of finding community in institutions. Miyatsu suggests how "Finding her friends, family, and coworkers unsympathetic to her psycho pain and the texts she reads to be of little solace, Esther looks for other places she might at least be allowed to stay and be tolerated, if not accepted, when her pain becomes too much for her" (57). Esther primarily contemplates a monastery, a prison, and a mental hospital as possible institutions. These unconventional institutions arguably appear appealing to Esther as they are regulated environments that could accommodate her needs and provide her support regardless of the level of her well-being. Yet, it seems that Esther does not seriously consider these options, as they prove either too restrictive for her or she is ultimately afraid of rejection rooted in her insecurities. For instance, when contemplating finding purpose in religion, Esther critiques the notion, expressing No matter how much you knelt and prayed, you still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world". She further speculates that

she is "pretty sure Catholics wouldn't take any crazy nuns" even if she were to join a monastery (158).

Finally, Esther searches for community, perhaps most notably, when she is committed to a mental hospital. Miyatsu argues that Esther initially harbors reservations about forming connections within this new environment, however, as her narrative unfolds she navigates complex relationships with various characters such as Valerie, Miss Norris, and Joan. Firstly, Miyatsu explains when first meeting Valerie, Esther struggles to discern the nature of Valerie's condition. This causes her to fear potential rejection, feeling insecure about her own mental state. It is only upon discovering Valerie's lobotomy scars that Esther envisions the possibility of connection between them (60). Secondly, Miyatsu highlights the bond Esther creates with Miss Norris. Miss Norris is a mute and seemingly unresponsive patient, who to Esther, may represent her potential future if her mental state deteriorates. Miyatsu refers to how their "sisterly silence" fosters a deep connection. Esther prioritizes and values time with Miss Norris (60). This might seem like an unconventional choice, however, Miyatsu suggests Esther might view their relationship as indicative of the potential for companionship even in a more disabled state (60-61). I find Miyatsu's argument compelling, as it is evident Esther desires a place where she can belong unconditionally, reflected in her own acceptance of Miss Norris.

Thirdly, following the loss of the relationship with Miss Norris, Esther's narrative shifts to her relationship with Joan. As mentioned, Esther's relationship with Joan is a complex one. Miyatsu argues that their connection is rooted in shared pain. She suggests Esther is initially skeptical of Joan, but finds common ground after recognizing Joan's self-inflicted scars and learning about her suicide attempt stimulated by Esther's own (61-62). Miyatsu elucidates that while they form a relationship rooted in their shared struggles, their relationship becomes competitive with the "system of rewards and privileges" within the mental hospital (62). Interestingly, Wagner-Martin also explores this competitiveness. She makes the connection of Esther and Joan's previous rivalry over Buddy with their competitive dynamic within the mental institutional system: "The competition Esther feels for Joan's 'progress' [and] envy for Joan's 'success' carries the reader back to the initial competitive standing as the women show their interest in Buddy Willard" (68). Wagner-Martin theorizes Joan as a literary double, representing the "wealthy elite" - a richer, freer, and more integrated Esther (65). It can be argued then, that the possibility of genuine connection between Esther

and Joan is there, but hindered by their surroundings - it being a common love interest, societal judgements, or the hierarchical and competitive system of mental institutions.

5.2.2. Reflections from *The Bell Jar's* community representation

Examining Esther's efforts in community building encompass turning to textual representation, contemplating differing institutions, and forming relationships within mental hospitals. Esther represents the struggle of a mentally ill individual, trying to find validation, meaning, comfort and connections in a society that does not facilitate. First and foremost, I would argue Esther's challenging quest for community highlight society's failure to acknowledge and accommodate the mentally ill. Esther receives emphasis from her community that there is no place for her as someone with an enduring mental illness. By being mentally ill, she is ultimately rejecting societal narratives in the eyes of others. Returning back to Ahmed's terms as introduced in the theoretical lens, Esther is both an 'affect alien' and a 'troublemaker'. As contended in the preceding chapter, Esther is trapped within a bell jar of disconnection from herself and the world around her - she is unable to adhere to the truths constructed by her surroundings.

Furthermore, by exploring readings of *The Bell Jar*, we may not only become aware of society's failure to recognize the mentally ill, but also gain awareness of the limitations of literary criticism in adequately addressing it. In this sense, examining the novel may lead to a 'meta-level' understanding, further reinforcing the issue of overlooking the disabled. Miyatsu is a scholar who addresses how much of the prevailing criticism on *The Bell Jar* explores Esther as "searching for and rejecting female role models", however, "she is also, or perhaps even primarily, searching for identity and community as a person with an enduring mental illness" (53). The existing criticism of Plath's work may mistakenly paint the examined attempts Esther makes to form connections as "mere symptoms" of her mental illness. Miyatsu problematizes how this represents "madness as a temporary stop, rather than a piece of her identity. It "denies the personhood of those who cannot 'recover', people who end up getting left behind" (52). Exploring representation for those marginalized in society, and taking that portrayal into serious account, is therefore imperative. I would argue if society does not make room for those unable to conform to the emphasized discourses of expected attitudes and behaviors, and we further do not even recognize the existence of them as actual people during their illness, we neglect millions of individuals.

However, if take Esther's efforts to find community as an ostracized character into serious account, we may feel like the answers paint a pessimistic reality. Miyatsu states in her exploration how the answers to finding a way to leave no one behind in *The Bell Jar* may "at first glance the answer seems bleak" (63). Firstly, Esther's search for textual solace leaves her feeling despondent, as the conclusions often end on somber notes, offering few answers. Secondly, the institutions she contemplates prove unpromising and unrealistic to her. Thirdly, while Esther attempts cultivating connections in the mental hospital, they all seem to falter - Joan is deceased, Miss Norris has been transferred to Wymark, and Esther has bid farewell to Valier, hoping to never encounter her again. According to Miyatsu, it might seem like the novel is "ultimately rejecting the possibility of a community of the mentally ill" (63). Nevertheless, she argues that interpreting it in this manner oversimplifies the context. Esther never rejects Miss Norris - their relationship is interrupted by Miss Norris' transfer to a different institution. Also, the potential connection with Joan is hindered by surrounding structures. Then, one could contend that while Esther envisions a community and there is the possibility for it, however external structures obstruct its realization (64). I believe Miyatsu, in alignment with other critics, illuminates the societal issues in her argument. Esther struggles to find community may not be misconstrued as shortcomings on Esther's or mentally ill individuals in forming connections, but rather society's lack of accommodating.

Furthermore, it believe it is crucial to point out how Esther is not going back to a normative and idealized life, seamlessly and happily reintegrated into society's norms. Esther's narrative does not ultimately reject other mentally ill individuals by not realizing a community or represent an overly optimistic curative narrative – rather, she portrays the reality of a person having gone through significant and complex growth. As explored, she has realized much about herself and her surroundings, questioning the validity of her external pressures, and finding her own, albeit uncertain, truths. As mentioned, she perceives her 'landscape' as changed and she does not see herself as a morally superior group of those that struggle mentally as elucidated by 'the promise of happiness'. In fact, her experiences enable her to realize that seemingly mentally-well people may also struggle. If she goes back to college, she will return to the students, that she reflects may be "trapped under bell jars" too and in fact not very different than the women she has met in the mental hospital after all (227).

Interestingly, *The Bell Jar* not only prompts many ways of us to reflect on the mentally ill, society, and community, but may in its own right create community. Miyatsu

compellingly states: "Plath offers one last way of reaching out to others in pain through the text of *The Bell Jar* itself" (65). She emphasizes the significant effect textual communities may provide. She elucidates:

> After scouring books and to relate to, often to little avail, Esther offers her own story to others as a detailed exploration of what it means to be mentally ill. Unlike the figures in the scandal papers, [...], Esther attempts in her story to provide as many details as she can about the consequences, opportunities, and insights that can arise out of an experience of mental distress. Although she does not have all of the answers, her account brings mental illness out of the shadows and allows "readers to come closer to the problems and lessons of depression that Plath never learned" (65).

The excerpt highlights Esther's narrative significance, underscoring its potential to offer solace and recognition. In her work, Miyatsu underscores the challenge of finding community as a mentally ill individual. Societal and cultural frameworks hinder the search for validation and contact as mentally ill. Moreover, society indicates an "enduring belief that connections with others should be based in positive affect and healing rather than shared mental distress" (66). As introduced initially in this thesis, Plath stands as a literary icon, labeled a poet for the sad female audience. Esther's narrative may be labeled pessimistic or potentially damaging to those afflicted. However, I contend one should not underestimate the possibilities that lie in this representation. I would suggest Esther paints a reflection of her reality, that others might relate and find comfort in. As discussed, devoid of either clear resolutions nor answers, she presents a raw and authentic portrayal of her experience. Miyatsu contends that literature has the ability to forge a "community of contact through writing" (67). Esther's desperate quest in textual representation becomes almost ironic, as her own narrative may function as what she was searching for.

Esther, as a fictional character, embodies the struggles experienced by many mentally ill individuals. She grapples with her turmoil in isolating, seeking solace in written words, as she cannot find it in her immediate surroundings. Furthermore, her struggles may present the gendered features of mental illness. In the theoretical lens, as illuminated by McCullen and Emmons, it becomes apparent that depression carries gendered implications. Women are disproportionately affected by depression, yet the available narratives for textual validation and support are often inadequate. McCullen and Emmons, as explored previously, highlight

the limitations of official resources in adequately addressing women's mental health needs and the gendered nature of depression. Consequently, women may turn to informal sources for support, which vary in their efficacy. Therefore, especially female audience may seek out and find comfort in Esther's narrative as a raw and complex representation of struggles.

However, as accounted for, Plath's legacy carries controversy and the perceived notion that her work appeals to the sad and angsty young woman. I believe this perspective creates a condescending label on those women who enjoy Plath's work and may turn readers away. In their conversation about Plath's authorship, Greenberg and Klaver delve into this negative notion of Plath as appealing to a sad, female audience. They challenge it as oversimplifying both the appeal and the work itself. Klaver suggests that the reluctance to appreciate Plath may stem from the perception that she sets a poor example as an "unregulated woman". However, she states that this 'un-regulation' is part of the novel's strength:

> The recognition that one could be such a good girl and yet also so dark and dangerous - that in fact this wild fluctuation in moods and personas is often the experience of young women, or of writers, or of those of us who struggle with depression or anxiety, and the overlap between these - was part of what was familiar and needed for me in *The Bell Jar* (187-188).

I understand Klaver and Greenberg as suggesting that *The Bell Jar* bears particular significance for women seeking textual community, not as a cautionary tale or a bad influence, but as a portrayal of a familiar, validating, and complex female character. Greenwood, for instance, states she was drawn to *The Bell Jar* due to: "the portrayal of a girl with a voice, who could express whatever she was feeling, from despair to giddy elation" (186). Similarly, Klaver highlights Esther's behavior as both "hilarious and *real*", resonating well with young female readers: "Middle-class white girls know this intimately, and Plath renders it perfectly" (187). As underscored, one should not take for granted that healing occurs solely in positive affect rather than finding validation in shared mental distress. While Esther endures profoundly dark experiences and expresses problematic sentiments, I argue it is crucial to not overlook the positive impact her representation offers to young women seeking solace and validation.

5.2.3. 'Everyone May Find Themselves under Bell Jars'

I posit that a final key reflection to carry forward with us by exploring Esther's search for community and lack thereof, is how everyone may find themselves struggling with their mental health. As underscored, Esther comes to the realization that she as an institutionalized mentally ill individual is not so different from the college girls, for: "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 to? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (227). This is a significant reflection from Esther, for as a mentally ill individual, you may find yourself misunderstood and lonely. As illuminated in Esther's narrative, one may experience a sense of alienation, perceiving oneself as flawed for not conforming to the conventional framework of happiness. I would suggest Esther, however, comes to question society's emphasis on happiness and conformity may not accurately reflect the reality for everyone - it might be a facade that masks how many individuals may experience struggling and feelings of disconnection.

Furthermore, I would suggest Barnard's and Perloff's insights in their respective works resonate well with this perspective. Firstly, Barnard argues how Esther comes to learn how "her struggle against the tyranny of custom and expectation is not her alone, but is generally characteristic of the human contusion" (79). Barnard posits that Esther's recognition that the hospital environment and the collegiate environment is in fact little different, enabling her to gain a new perspective of societal frameworks and navigating her mental health more successfully (79). Furthermore, Perloff argues how *The Bell Jar* serves as a reflection of how "illness is a metaphor for a sick society" (96). Perloff elucidates how the prevalence of mental and physical ailments throughout the novel underscores that illness is not a condition exclusive to certain individuals or that sickness looks a specific way. She states how: "no one is exempt from illness. Even Buddy Willard, the all-American boy who radiates good health, develops tuberculosis and has to spend a winter in a sanatorium" (97). Rather, illness is pervasive within society at a large, reflecting a larger condition, which is our societal and cultural reality (96).

I would posit, then, that both Perloff and Barnard underscore how Esther's struggles are not isolated incidents. While her narrative is filled with grave challenges, it suggests a broader resonance, indicating that her illness is not singular to her alone - in the sense that everyone may struggle, and that challenges may often be stimulated by our surroundings.

Furthermore, we need to question how we categorize individuals and marginalize those who struggle. Everyone may find themselves suffering, or under bell jars. Perhaps Esther's would have had an easier trajectory if this was acknowledged and her need for solace was consequently easier found. Yet, I would argue it is important to not diminish the severity of Esther's affliction and challenges, furthermore, recognizing her affliction. This first perspective does not intend to disregard the seriousness of Esther's mental struggles by stating how 'everyone struggles'. Perloff underscores: "Silvia Plath is no silly sentimentalist; she knows quite well that her heroine *is* different from most college girls, that her bell jar is less fragile, less easy to remove than theirs" (97). Esther's narrative unveils a protagonist grappling with profound inner turmoil, underscoring the dire need for support and understanding. In a societal context where illness is destigmatized and normalized, Esther might find solace and connection, thereby alleviating her feelings of isolation and her marginalization.

5.3.   Breaking the Bell Jar: Concluding Remarks

The depth of Esther's narration and imagery continues to be underscored, as the bell jar may represent positive symbolism and important reflections to carry forward simultaneously as depicting a grave entrapment. By 'breaking' the bell jar we may gain insights into the intricacies of mental health and the importance of recognizing these and those afflicted. Firstly, by exploring the enigmatic conclusion of *The Bell Jar* (1963), we may explore how mental health is complex and recovery entails no certain truths. Grappling with mental health is an ongoing battle, however, by challenging imposed and harmful pressures, one may find a path to self-discovery and acceptance. I posit that Esther represents a character that deeply struggles, but persists to find ways to meet the world more and more as herself. Secondly, Esther's story encourages us to reconsider how we view mentally ill and urges us to reflect on how we may include everyone in our society. I would argue the mentally ill desperately needs validation and comfort, and especially women seek out representation, and despite controversy I contend *The Bell Jar* emerges as a very valuable tool for just this.

Interestingly, various scholars suggest the positive conclusion of Esther, entailing her resolution as a mother - something explored when discussing the enigmatic ending in this section. At the same time, we explored how Esther may perceive domesticity as a trap and a future she cannot reconcile with in the preceding chapter. Then, these two perspectives may seem incompatible. However, I would posit that an important concluding remark to end this

chapter on is how they do not contradict each other. As Esther is frustrated and confused by the demand to define herself as a woman in her society, we may make the mistake to think Esther has to follow one branch of her 'the fig tree', choosing one primary objective as a woman.

Esther states that "How easy having babies seemed to women around me! Why has I so unmaternal and apart?" (212), while also previously thinking "It would be nice, living by the sea with piles of little kids and pigs and chickens, wearing what my grandmother called wash dresses, and sitting about in some kitchen with bright linoleum and fat arms, drinking pots of coffee" (144). I would argue Esther is uncertain what she wishes and considers various futures for herself, never truly rejecting a trajectory. She wants "change and exactment" and "to shoot off in all directions [herself], like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (79). In accordance with Friedan's argument, Esther must find her "whole life as a woman". Friedan stated how women must "unequivocally say 'no' to the housewife image", however, "This does not mean, of course, that she must have to divorce her husband, abandon her children, and give up her home. She does not have to choose between marriage and career, that was the mistaken choice of the feminine mystique" (277). I would suggest no matter what Esther's future looks like, the power of her narrative lies in her unwritten story and her ability to write it in her own accord, whatever that might look like.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has embarked on an exploration of the nuanced and intricate portrayal of mental health, particularly depression, through the lens of Esther Greenwood. Through this exploration, I wished to extract valuable insights and reflections, emphasizing the potential and importance of literature, in particular *The Bell Jar* (1963), in our continuing engagement and understanding of this pressing issue. Despite its pervasive nature and extensive history, mental health continues to be a stigmatized topic, leaving millions of afflicted individuals isolated, confused, and without adequate support. Esther emerges as a complex and unique protagonist, offering readers a poignant glimpse into the inner turmoil of a mentally ill woman in the mid-twentieth century. Plath's novel, which has elicited a range of reactions since its publication, remains a significant piece of the literary canon. With its varying discourses and multifaceted readings, in continues to contribute to societal debates, particularly within the realm of mental health. I contend *The Bell Jar* proves to be a formidable tool for capturing the complexities of the inner self and its intersection with society.

To establish the theoretical framework for my exploration in this thesis, I delved into theories on depression and narrative, while also considering the gendered implications. Narrative emerges as a powerful tool, providing voice and meaning-making for those affected, while also offering insights into the complex nature of illness to those unaffected or to those seeking connection. Women, in particular, bear a heavy burden from depression, yet the limited and inadequate discourses and representation exacerbate their challenges. Thus, attention to illness narratives becomes crucial. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and considerations of such narratives, as they can be intricate, sensitive, and often delve into dark and challenging terrain.

Furthermore, I drew from the seminal works of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Sarah Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), illuminating how ideals and agendas shape the available discourses and individual experiences, negatively constraining and suppressing alternative truths and authentic selves. From the 1950s to the present day, societal and cultural pressures weight heavily on individuals, particularly those already marginalized or ostracized. Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the complexities of mental health and surrounding frameworks.

The first main chapter of this thesis delved into *The Bell Jar's* protagonist and sole narrator, Esther Greenwood. Through her unique narration, containing a fascinating, singular perspective, distinctive tone, and 'erratic' form, the reader encounters a raw and candid portrayal of inner turmoil. Following this, the second main chapter utilized the bell jar metaphor as a symbol of being trapped, entailing an embodiment of a border narrative, a symbol of individual anguish, and a representation of societal and cultural pressures. Esther is deeply grappling with her mental health, moreover as a young woman she is presented with limited options in her surroundings, further adding to her struggles. Finally, the third main chapter set out to 'break' the bell jar – exploring what lessons can be learned from Esther's representation and the potential and importance of textual community.

I wish to end here by referring to a reflection prompted by Esther's response to the question "what is a poem" by Buddy in Chapter 5:

> Do you know what a poem is, Esther?'
>
> No, what?' I would say.
>
> A piece of dust.'
>
> Then, just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, 'So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together.'
>
> And of course Buddy wouldn't have any answer to that, because what I said was true. People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick or couldn't sleep (53).

I posit Esther's answer in the excerpt above is one that carries valuable insight for us to conclude on in terms of the role of literature in our continued reflection upon mental health. Her assertion that "a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people together" reflects her belief in the enduring power of the written word, transcending mortality and leaving a lasting legacy. Poetry has the ability to provide solace, comfort, and understanding to individuals in need – those who are "unhappy", "sick", or "couldn't sleep". Esther's response shows her questioning the validity of societal values and norms as presented in Buddy. To her, artistic expression proves invaluable. She contemplates the meaning of existence and questions the authority of pre-emphasized truths. I would argue Esther suggests,

amidst societal pressures, truths, and individual anguish, it is the lasting value of art and connection between us that endure.

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