

BOOK REVIEW:

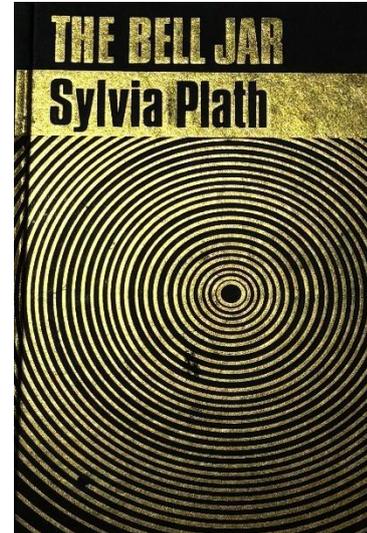
A Mind Under Pressure: Conflict and Control in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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*“A man doesn’t have a worry in the world,
while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head
like a big stick, to keep me in line.”¹*

Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* was revolutionary following its publication in 1963. The novel explores themes of mental illness, suicide, and critiques the societal expectations on women in the 1950s, a period defined by strict conformity and social codes. Public spaces that Esther navigates- the streets, offices, hospital corridors- contort into battlegrounds as society's rigid demands give her no autonomy over her own life. This review examines how these environments serve as mechanisms of conflict and control, reinforcing

the pressures that contribute to Esther’s breakdown.

The Bell Jar closely examines what it meant to be a woman living under society's strict restraints in the 1950s. Plath introduces us to Esther Greenwood, a talented young woman who wins a prestigious internship with a fashion magazine in New York, opening her eyes to a plethora of amazing career opportunities. Yet she also becomes increasingly aware of the narrow roles and double standards that shape her and other women's lives, confronting career and family not as complementary possibilities but completely irreconcilable choices- with society pushing the latter. When Esther returns home,

¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (Faber and Faber Limited, 2013), p. 212.

sullen and depressed, she faces multiple setbacks- such as rejection from a writing programme she was eager to join- which forces her into a deeper state of anxiety and depression. This, along with her troubled love life and inability to settle on her future goals, leads Esther to attempt suicide multiple times, leaving her hospitalised and subjected to electroconvulsive therapy.

Throughout the novel, the metaphor of the “bell jar” represents the suffocating mix of social expectations and mental illness that distorts Esther’s world, presenting the control over women’s autonomy as a force which breaks any sense of freedom and self-direction. The most famous and beloved quote from *The Bell Jar* perfectly encapsulates this idea:

“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. [...] 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.”

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Esther’s dream of the fig tree represents the stark reality for herself and other women of this

time. Despite the multitude of options society leads her to believe she has, she quickly learns that she will never be able to excel intellectually whilst conforming to the domestic expectations placed on her- she is amidst a society where women are silenced profusely.

“The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.”³

Plath’s words capture so perfectly the sense of hopelessness society can instil within women, highlighting how hard it is to navigate a world with such rigid constraints.

The Bell Jar illustrates this through Esther’s story- as she navigates life in New York, she is constantly scrutinized, sexualised, or dismissed entirely. Whether in the office or on the streets, societies implicit rules constantly govern her, reinforcing the idea that women’s autonomy is always being narrowed. What I find most interesting within the novel, though, is the contrast between Esther’s public performance and private collapse. She carefully constructs a different version of herself when in public spaces to mask her psychological suffering, generating the idea that public spaces demand self-preservation that turns out to be corrosive; it is the expectations embedded within these public spaces that greatly impacts Esther’s mental health, forcing her to mask her pain,

² Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 73.

³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 17.

only allowing this act to collapse when she is completely alone. Plath's presentation of psychiatric institutions makes public space an even larger site of surveillance and discipline. Through the electroconvulsive treatment and lack of proper care from corrupt characters such as Dr Nolan, Esther's movements are completely restricted, her identity completely dissolved and transformed into what society deems 'ideal', taking complete control over her.

Paulina Bren summed up the novel perfectly when she argued: "Sylvia Plath keenly felt the contradictions of the 1950s- she embodied them and she battled them."⁴ Just like Bren suggests, *The Bell Jar* acts as more than just an author's biography- it represents the

suffocating expectations women are constantly forced to live up to, and the control society seeks to have over them, revealing the precarious boundaries between conformity, resistance, and fighting for sanity. Plath uses Esther's mental decline to represent the pressure on women to excel intellectually, all whilst performing their 'domestic duties', and fighting to appeal to societies fascination with youth and beauty. Despite the constant dismissal of women's ambitions, Plath offers hope that as a collective, we can overcome the limitations to build a future solely decided by ourselves.

My rating: ★★★★★

⁴ Mary Jo Murphy, 'The hotel that nurtured ambitious women and their New York dreams', *The Washington Post* <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-hotel-that-nurtured-ambitious-women-and-their-new-york-dreams/2021/03/24/2bedc43a-8007-11eb-ac37-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-hotel-that-nurtured-ambitious-women-and-their-new-york-dreams/2021/03/24/2bedc43a-8007-11eb-ac37-4383f7709abe_story.html)

[4383f7709abe_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-hotel-that-nurtured-ambitious-women-and-their-new-york-dreams/2021/03/24/2bedc43a-8007-11eb-ac37-4383f7709abe_story.html)> [Accessed 2 December 2025].

-Photo taken by myself, Chloe Elsweiler, showing *The Bell Jar* (Faber and Faber Limited, 2013).