

Emirati Journal of Education and Literature
Vol 4 Issue 1 (2026)
Pages 68 - 77
Available at
www.emiratesscholar.com

The Struggle Within: A Study of Women's Confinement, Identity, and Psychological Realism in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar

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ARTICLE INFO

KEYWORDS

Keywords: Gender roles; Identity; psychological realism; socio-cultural pressures; confinement; nonconformity; mental illness

HOW TO CITE

Khothong, C., & Abdulqader, M. (2026). The Struggle Within: A Study of Women's Confinement, Identity, and Psychological Realism in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. Emirati Journal of Education and Literature, 4(1), 68-77.
https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

ABSTRACT

The study examines the conflict between societal expectations and individual freedom as portrayed through Esther in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. It also investigates how Sylvia utilizes psychological realism as a narrative technique to reveal Esther's experiences and critique socio-cultural pressures on women in the 1950s. It analyzes how the symbol of the bell jar was used to capture Esthers' sense of suffocation, confusion, and loss of identity. To achieve these objectives, thematic and literary contextual analysis were employed. The primary data were collected from Sylivia Plath's The Bell Jar, while secondary data were obtained from previous studies and scholarly articles related to Plath's confessional literature and psychological realism. The findings revealed that The Bell Jar portrays the tension between societal expectations and personal freedom as caused by social expectations and restricted gender roles, confinement and identity crisis and search for self. Through the use of psychological realism Plath critiqued the socio-cultural pressures and exposed the unfair double standards, oppressive social expectations and the institutional tendency to pathologize women's nonconformity. The symbol of the bell jar represents Esther's psychological confinement and struggle for identity, reflecting her sense of isolation, loss and gradual movement toward recovery. Together these findings illustrate how external pressures and internal conflicts shape Esther's psychological struggle and quest for autonomy.

Double-blind peer review by independent reviewers.

Received: 27 Feb 2026, Accepted: 26 May 2026, Published: 28 Jun 2026

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Introduction

The Bell Jar is a semi-autobiographical novel by Sylvia Plath, widely known as a seminal work of confessional literature. Plath interweaves her personal background with universal themes including identity, gender roles, mental illness, and societal expectations to create a work that resonates literally and psychologically (Hoag, 2024). Set in 1950s America, a period marked by rigid gender roles and societal expectations that intensified women struggle and inequality (Alheshami & Sha'ar, 2020). The novel offers a strong portrayal of depression and pressures on women faced during that period. Plath's seamless blend of autobiography and social critique allows readers to immerse themselves in the world of the novel (Toth, 2024). The study examines Plath's critique of gender inequality, traditional gender roles through the use of psychological realism in articulating Esther's confinement and identity crisis.

Although several studies Anika and Barman (2023), Baldick (2015), Hoag (2024), Storstrøm (2024), have explored the thematic analysis and the feminist perspective in The Bell Jar, little is known about the effect of Plath's narrative styles especially her confessional approach and psychological realism and their role in highlighting the conflict between the societal expectations and personal freedom. Most studies Baldick (2015), Storstrøm (2024) Stevanović (2024), have focused on themes of confinement and identity crisis, leaving a gap of understanding how Sylvia employs psychological realism as a narrative technique to reveal Esther's experiences and critique the socio-cultural treatment of women in the 1950s period of time. Additionally, much research has analyzed symbolic metaphors like the bell jar and the fig tree, however, less attention has been given to how the narrative features intersect with Plath' semi-autobiographical structure to authenticate Esther's struggle as relatable and real. These gaps call for a holistic study that examines how The Bell Jar portrays the conflict between societal expectation and psychological pressure.

The study contributes to literary scholarship by providing a unique, integrated analysis of The Bell Jar that situates its confessional narratives, themes of confinement and identity crisis, psychological realism and symbolism within a unified framework. Earlier studies typically explore these elements in isolation; this research bridges these areas to reveal how Plath's narrative techniques enhance the novel's psychological and socio-cultural dimensions. It offers fresh insights into how Plath's semi-autobiographical style shapes readers' perceptions of mental health, gender roles and identity (Sha'ar & Rofiah,2018). Furthermore, the study expands discussions on psychological realism in modernist and feminist literature and affirms the novel's ongoing relevance in conversation about mental illness and gender inequality. By applying psychological and feminist literary theories, this research provides a model for future studies on autobiographical literature and its cultural-historical significance. The study seeks to answer the following research questions;

How does The Bell Jar explore the conflict between societal expectations and personal freedom in Esther's life?

How does Sylvia Plath utilize psychological realism as a narrative technique to expose Esther's experiences and critique socio-cultural pressures faced by women in the 1950s?

What role does the symbol of The Bell Jar play in highlighting Esther's struggle with identity and mental health?

Review of relevant literature

Plath's narrative style

Sylvia Plath is renowned for her confessional style of writing, which is vividly demonstrated in The Bell Jar. This semi-autobiographical novel is distinguished by its rich imagery, symbolic depth, and confessional tone that invites readers into the intimate realms of the protagonist's psyche (Chowdhury, 2024, Sha'ar et al., 2018). Researchers such as Panelatti (2018) and Smith (2012), emphasize how Plath's distinctive narrative style skillfully intertwines micro-level personal experience with broader social and cultural themes, producing works that resonate across generations and socio-cultural contexts. This blending of scales enhances emphatic engagement with Esther's struggle and highlights the timeless relevance of the novel's core issues (Alheshami et al., 2021).

Symbolism and metaphor are central to Plath's narrative style. The fig tree metaphor in The Bell Jar is symbolic of Esther's existential crisis and indecision about her future (Håkansson, 2024). Positioned at a climactic moment, the fig tree symbolizes the multiple life paths before Ester, each is representing different aspirations and values. (Smith, 2010). This metaphor deepens the psychological portrayal of Esther's character, illustrating the fear that accompanies choice and self-definition. Plath's confessional tone lends authenticity and emotional honesty to the narrative, rooted in her own lived experiences. Singh (2022) argues that literature mirrors its era. Baldick (2015) defined the confessional literature as an autobiographical mode of writing that reveals the writer's problems with unusual frankness (p.48). Plath's

ISSN: 3080-1567 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

The Bell Jar exemplifies this definition as it draws heavily from her own experiences and psychological struggles.

The Issues of confinement and identity crisis in The Bell Jar

The novel explores multiple dimensions of confinement through Esther's perspective, particularly those stemming from societal and gendered expectations. Esther's experiences with relationships, marriage and motherhood are deeply entangled with prescribed female roles, which clash with her personal desires and contribute to her depression (Tóth,2023). Arslan (2024) identifies the bell jar as a symbol for Esther's psychological and social entrapment, illustrating oppression, discrimination and gender inequality that culminate in her identity crisis. The researcher further attributed Esther's feeling of inadequacy and isolation to the societal expectations and unspoken gender rules. Bara (2024) interprets the bell jar as embodying not only mental illness but also the constriction caused by societal discrimination, which restrict freedom and individuality.

Esther experienced an identity crisis which Erickson (1970) described as a normative stage during adolescence, when individuals struggle to fit in the socio-cultural context and establish a clear sense of self and personal direction. Jenkins (2014) further conceptualizes identity as a dynamic, evolving sense of self, shaped by personal, social and cultural forces. The gendered context of the 1950s, where men enjoyed comparatively greater freedom while women were confined to narrow roles, provides a critical backdrop to Esther struggle (Sharma et al, 2020, Yan, 2022). In this particular society, women were expected to be nurses, teachers, and obedient wives (Nicolas, 2015) roles that Esther totally confronts and resists. Anika and Barman (2023) highlight how the traditional gender roles heavily influence Esther's self-perception, identity crisis and mental illness. Additionally, Nurlianingsih (2014) elaborates that societal pressures related to marriage and domesticity exacerbate Esther's feelings of isolation and fracture her sense of identity.

Conversely, Esther's quest for self-independence and her confrontation with mental health challenges represent a significant assertion of agency. Time spent in the asylum serves as a setting where Esther explores belonging, self-awareness and autonomy, revealing the complex interplay between mental health and identity formation (Miyatsu, 2018). Consistent with Erickson's (1970) theory, Esther's internal crisis arises from the clash between imposed social roles and her emerging self-identity, resulting in identity diffusion and self-doubt (Nurlianingsih, 2014). The absence of strong role models or supportive communities further deepens her isolation. Rathore (2024) illustrates this tension by emphasizing Esther's dilemma between a conforming public persona and a psychological tool of negotiating these dualities.

Plath's integration of symbolic imagery, confessional tone and character interiority in The Bell Jar, exemplifies the literary techniques that vividly portray Esther's psychological realism (Baldwin, 2004). This helps expose the conflicts between self and society, individual aspiration, and cultural limitation.

Theoretical Framework

Psychological realism is a narrative style which focuses on the "inner mind" of the characters, their thoughts, emotions, and mental states. It is an approach that intensely reflects human experiences, especially in the framework of mental health, which helps readers understand the characters' pain, weakness, and inner struggles. (Dhara Nag, 2024). It is guided by the principles that focus on the character's mind and personal experiences. The characters' actions are explained through psychological development. The authors often create complicated characters who are ambitious and emotionally unstable. Additionally, the writers utilize a nonlinear story and equip the main characters with interior monologues to depict the actual mental process (Gast et al., 2023). The story is narrated from a first-person perspective, allowing the readers to access the characters' inner thoughts (Vega, 2015). The authors also utilize a realistic language and symbolically rich environment to support the psychological depth of the story.

Psychological realism is used in this study to dive into Esther's inner conflicts, her mental health problems and emotional turmoil. It particularly expounds how her psyche shapes her emotions and influences her overall behavior. Exploring psychological realism helped us to understand Esther's universal struggle and depression that she experienced in her journey (John, 2023). The Bell Jar reflected how Plath not only portrays mental illness, but also invites readers to examine the clash of identities and the challenges of finding oneself under social pressure (Tsank, 2010; Chandran, 2016). These pressures significantly created Esther's self-image while hindering her identity development (Li, 2024). Moreover, comparing The Bell Jar to The Cat's Eye, the protagonists in both novels are oppressed by their surroundings leading to mental illness and suicide (Çayırlı, 2023). Esther's madness functions as a form of resistance against an oppressive society, which reawakens the female consciousness. (Gazairi, 2024). Traumatic experiences like her father's death and her mother's

ISSN: 3080-1567 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

emotional negligence brought up a fear of isolation, resulting in the complicated ability to establish any human relationship (John, 2023, Tian & Hu, 2022).

Methodology

Research design and data collection

This study utilizes a qualitative research design to conduct an in-depth analysis of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. A qualitative approach involves the examination of non-numerical data to explore the contextual meanings and underlying themes within a text (Carona & Atanázio 2024). Lee (2024) highlights the flexibility of qualitative methods in data collection, allowing researchers to adapt their focus in response to emerging insights during the analysis. This research specifically investigates how Plath's interwoven her personal experiences with universal themes, thereby elucidating her sophisticated narrative techniques and their broader literary implications (Hakkoosh et al., 2022).

Primary data was driven from close textual analysis of The Bell Jar. The close reading of the text focused on identifying confessional narrative elements, particularly through the use of symbols and metaphors that relate to the protagonist's mental health struggles. The analysis foregrounded central themes such as confinement, identity, and psychological realism. Meanwhile, the secondary data comprised prior scholarly studies on Plath's narrative style. The relevant literature provided insights into concepts of entrapment, gender roles, societal expectations of women in the 1950s, contextualizing Plath's work within a socio-historical framework.

Data Analysis

The study employs multiple analytical approaches to examine The Bell Jar. Initially, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes within the text, addressing the first and second research questions. This analysis was done systematically following steps suggested by Alhojailan and Ibrahim (2012). First, the researchers familiarized themselves by reading the text thoroughly to understand its content. Second, initial codes were generated and highlighted throughout the text. Third, to search for themes, these emerging codes were grouped into clusters that share similar ideas. Fourth, these groups were reviewed and refined. In this stage sub-themes were collapsed and other irrelevant themes were ignored. Finally, significant themes were defined and those which effectively helped answering the research questions were selected and reported. In addition, a contextual analysis was performed to explore the use of symbols, particularly to respond to the third research questions. These analytical methods facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the test's layered meanings.

Findings

To answer the first research question, how does The Bell Jar explore the conflict between societal expectations and personal freedom in Esther's life? The findings revealed that Esther's struggles arise from both external and internal pressures. Three themes emerged: social expectations and gender roles, confinement and loss of self, and identity and search for self.

Theme 1: Social expectations and gender roles

The theme of social expectation reflects how the 1950s American society imposes rigid gender roles that limit Esther's freedom to pursue a career or live independently. She experienced growing unhappiness and anxiety as she struggled to reconcile her past achievements with demands of her new environment. This internal conflict sets the stage for the onset of her mental illness, as she tries to balance her inner desires with external realities. The "glass bell jar" symbolically reflects the suffocating entrapment by social expectations and mental torment (Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1 "… wherever I sat… I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (p.233)

This quote highlights the physical location or attempts to escape the transparent yet unbreakable bell jar which represents the persistent pressure and constraint of gender roles and societal norms. The "sour air" refers to the toxicity of these expectations which block her freedom and well-being.

Moreover, Plath's novel unveiled conflicting expectations placed on women by society and by other women as well (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2 "I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. "But what about your career?" she had cried" (p.276)

In this excerpt, Esther recalls a conversation about marriage and motherhood with a successful female poet who reacts with shock, emphasizing her belief in prioritizing a professional career over domestic life. This tension reflects the limited and contradictory roles of women, forcing them to choose between personal life and professional aspirations.

Theme 2: Confinement and loss of self

This theme illustrates how these expectations cause Esther's psychological suffocation while trying to live up

ISSN: 3080-1567 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

to them. Esther's internal experience of confinement both from external societal pressures and her own mental state feeds into a loss of self and deep emotional turmoil.

Excerpt 3 "I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine-panelling. I felt like a hole in the ground" (p.19)

Here Esther's imagery conveys a profound sense of invisibility and insignificance. The shrinking "small black dot" and the "hole in the ground" symbolize her diminishing sense of self and growing invisibility within her environment. This further shows her isolation and loss of identity. Her emotions intensify in excerpts 4 as she begins feeling tired of chasing her dreams. She lost her passion, and her goals became increasingly unclear.

Excerpt 4 "After nineteen years of running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another, I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race" (p.33-34)

This reflection reveals Esther's lifelong struggle to meet expectations, but now she is disillusioned. Her loss of passion and uncertainty about the future indicates a crisis of purpose and identity, contributing to her emotional descent.

Theme 3: Identity and search for self

This theme shows Esther's attempt to reclaim autonomy by questioning the life paths offered to her marriage, domesticity and submission. The Bell Jar portrays the conflict between social conformity and personal liberation as a central struggle in Esther's life (Excerpt 5), suggesting that her mental collapse is not merely individual but also a result of oppressive cultural structure that restrict woman freedom.

Excerpt 5 "What do you have in mind after you graduate?" What I always thought I had in mind was getting some big scholarship…Then I thought I'd be a professor…and be an editor…Usually, I had these plans on the tip of my tongue" (p.37-38)

Although Esther has ambitious plans "on the tip of her tongue", she cannot fully commit to any path. This hesitation exemplifies the early stage of identity formation where one explores possible futures but feel unsure, torn between personal aspirations and societal expectations.

Excerpt 6 "That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (p.99)

This excerpt demonstrates Esther's resistance to traditional roles, especially marriage. Her desire for "change and excitement" instead of "infinite security" communicates her search for an authentic self beyond prescribed gender norms. This tension between conformity and freedom is central to her identity struggle. This theme shows that Esther's identity search is not a straightforward personal journey but a complex response to societal expectation, fear of choice and the need for self-identification.

To answer the second research question, how Sylvia utilizes psychological realism as a narrative technique to reveal Esther's experiences and critique socio-cultural pressures on women in the 1950s, Plath exposes how these pressures placed on women profoundly oppressed those who resisted conformity. Esther's experiences (Excerpts 7- 10) revealed the damaging effects of rigid gender roles, double standards and the medicalization of female nonconformity.

Theme 1: The unequal standards

This theme portrays how women represented by Esther at that time were expected to maintain purity and moral perfection while men's transient sexual relationships were often ignored or allowed (Excerpt 1). These unequal standards limited women freedom and enforced their submission.

Excerpt 1 "These seniors said most boys were like that and you couldn't honestly accuse them of anything until you were at least pinned or engaged to be married" (p.84)

Esther in this excerpt reveals how male misconduct is normalized and excused in society, silencing women's complaints and reinforcing sexist tolerance. It further exposes a culture where men's inappropriate behavior is socially tolerated, while women remain vulnerable and powerless. This hypocrisy in sexual expectations (Excerpt 2) uncover how men value purity yet disrespect women who fail to conform.

Excerpt 2 "The best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure …. they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them, she would do that with other men, and they would end up making her life miserable" (p.96)

Plath illustrated how women's worth is tied to sexual conduct, while men perpetuate gender inequality and enjoy moral leniency. Therefore, she loaded Esther with experiences (Excerpt 3) to critique unequal gender-based rules and realities.

ISSN: 3080-1567 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

Excerpt 3 "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" (p.96-97)

Esther revolted against the double standards as she felt trapped in an unfair system that demanded strict purity but excused male transgressions.

Theme 2: Framing nonconformity as illness

The theme shows how women's nonconformity was considered as mental illness. When Esther rejects the social expectations, she was labeled as mentally ill. Instead of looking at her struggles, the medical system represented by Dr. Gordon failed to understand her condition (Excerpt 4), stigmatizing her as a mad woman. The medical system tries to force her into conformity rather than to understand her condition.

Excerpt 4 "Then I thought, how could this Doctor Gordon help me? "Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong" What did I think was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong" (p.160)

When Dr. Gordon asks, "What do you think is wrong?" it implies that her suffering is imagined or exaggerated. This illustrates how the system undermines the legitimacy of her experience, emphasizing control over care. Being Dr. Gordon's patient worsens Esther's condition, as she revealed in (Excerpt 20).

Excerpt 5 "My mother smiled. "I knew my baby wasn't like… those awful people… at that hospital" She paused. "I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (p.181)

Esther's mom's denial of her mental illness reflects the broader societal attitudes that minimized mental health struggle, expecting women to choose to be well again. This denial added to her emotional pressure and isolation. These themes underscore how women were unfairly treated and labeled as mentally ill when they rejected unspoken gender rules and societal expectations of conformity.

To answer the third research question, what role does the symbol of The Bell Jar play in highlighting Esther's struggle with identity and mental health? The bell jar symbolizes Esther's psychological and emotional confinement, exposing her struggles with depression and fragmented sense of identity. It underscores the tension between societal expectations and personal freedom. The symbol represents the invisible barriers separating Esther from the world, reflecting her emotional and psychological paralysis. Esther feels trapped inside her own thoughts, unable to relate to society's expectations of women. Her longing for guidance in "I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do" (p.45) uncovers her dependence on external validation. The bell jar thus mirrors Esther's inner void and inability to connect or find meaning in a world that demands conformity.

As the rising action proceeds, the bell jar becomes a symbol of both confinement and recovery, illustrating the fluctuation of Esther's mental state. Her realization that "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (p.270). signifies the first step toward healing, a fragile moment of peace and self-awareness. Moreover, the recurring image of the bell jar reminds the reader that recovery is uncertain as Esther reflects, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream" (p.298). This metaphor reveals that even when the pressure eases, the memory of entrapment lingers. Through this symbol Plath contextualizes Esther identity crisis and mental illness not as isolated experiences but as responses to societal pressures and limited female roles.

Discussion

This study examines how The Bell Jar's portrays the conflict between society and personal freedom in Esther's life. It also investigates how Sylvia utilizes psychological realism as a narrative technique to reveal Esther's experiences and critique socio-cultural pressures on women in the 1950s. It analyzes how the symbol of the bell jar was symbolically used to capture Esthers' sense of suffocation, confusion, loss of identity. Employing a qualitative approach, the themes collectively depicted the tension between social expectations and individual freedom. Additionally, Esther's rejection of traditional female roles and showing how institutions pathologize nonconformity, Plath exposes the unfair double standards and oppressive social expectations. The confessional tone of the narrative and the nonlinear style invite readers into Esthers' fragmented mental state, aligning with psychological realism's focus on the detailed interiority and complex characterization. Utilizing a contextual approach, the study identified key symbols such as the bell jar and the fig tree and analyzed how Plath employed them to express Esther's psychological state.

To address the first research question, the qualitative findings illustrate how Esther faces immense pressure to conform which lead to anxiety and confinement. This corresponds with Arslan (2024) and Bara (2024) who link Esther's depression to societal oppression and gender inequality. Esther's internal conflict between her aspirational-self and the externally imposed roles, echoes the principle of psychological realism, which suggests

ISSN: 3080-1567 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

that the character's actions and emotions are shaped by their psychological development within social contexts (Gast et al., 2023) Boyer (2004 supports this finding by showing how Esther was entrapped by particular assumptions despite external changes. In contrast, Fattor (2024) attributes Esther's crisis to internal psychological fragility, ignoring social influence. These contradicting views mirror the debates in psychological realism over individual psychology versus societal determinism in shaping character.

Moreover, Esther's confinement and loss of self, portrays her psychological and emotional entrapment by social norms and internal confusion. In line with Nurlianingsih (2014), the findings revealed that Esthers' dilemma was caused by her attempts to meet others' expectations while losing connection with herself. The emotional numbness and exhaustion mirror her mental confinement as she realizes that accomplishment has left her powerless and helpless. These specific moments show the growth of Esther's mental and emotional confinement and being trapped inside her mind. The struggle for conformity, combined with internal challenges like self-doubt and fear amplify Esther's sense of losing her identity that gradually destroys one's sense of self. This aligns with Bara (2024) who asserts that the social rules and gender roles imposed by society intensify the feeling of entrapment and hinders personal growth. However, Fattor (2024) offers a contrasting view, arguing that Esther's struggles arise from her inherent vulnerabilities rather than being significantly influenced by external social factors.

Additionally, the findings revealed that a significant part of Esther's journey revolves around her quest for self-discovery. She often feels confused and uncertain about the future, torn between her desire for independence and the societal expectations imposed on women (Anika & Barman, 2023). Esther envisions multiple future careers such as becoming a poet, a professor, or having a family. But her inability to choose one profession leaves her overwhelmed and paralyzed (Excerpt 21, Plath, 1963). This uncertainty reflects her fragile sense of identity and difficulty in defining her true aspirations. Erikson's (1970) Theory of Adolescent Identity (TAI) explained that such confusion emerges when individuals struggle to establish a coherent self-concept. However, Esther's isolation and self-doubt have been intensified by the social environment that reinforces gender roles. Expressing her thoughts in interior monologues realistically granted the readers intimate access to her psychology, inner mind, and fragmented thoughts. The findings resonate with Nurlianingsih (2014) and Miyatsu (2018), who assert that young women like Esther encounter conflicting pressures between personal ambitions and societal expectations, leading to profound psychological instability.

To address the second research question, themes uncover the society's unequal standards and framing nonconformity as illness. Esther is subjected to the unfair double standards rooted in gender expectations that granted men sexual freedom while punishing women's independence (Arslan, 2024). This inequality is portrayed through Esther's psychological distress, illustrating psychological realism principles that character's mind and experiences reflect broader socio-cultural forces. Her rejection of traditional gender roles was pathologized with mental illness and used as a tool for enforcing conformity. Her rejection to embrace marriage and motherhood is not acknowledged as a valid choice but treated as evidence of mental illness. Håkansson (2024) similarly asserted that this medicalization masks the social realities that contributed to her suffering. This process reflects a broader cultural norm that associates women's non-conformity with psychological pathology. Plath conveyed the idea that Esther's breakdown should not be viewed merely as a medical phenomenon but as a response to the stigmatizing labels imposed on her.

To address the third research question, the findings revealed that the bell jar serves as a central symbol representing both Esther's confinement and her fragile journey toward recovery. The symbol encapsulates her psychological emotional paralysis, reflecting how depression and identity loss operate within restrictive social structures. Her sense of isolation and suffocation by invisible barriers illustrates the inner turmoil of a woman struggling to reconcile personal aspirations and social expectations. These findings align with those of Anika and Barman's (2023), reporting that Esther's uncertainty about her future stems from the conflict between her desire for independence and the gender norms that prescribe her role.

The symbolic imagery of the bell jar also represents both entrapment and the possibility of freedom. Its fluctuating presence reflects the unstable nature of Esther's mental state and recovery. This supports Nagarale's (2018) argument that Plath's symbolic narrative externalizes her internal psychological suffering through images. Håkansson (2024) and Arslan (2024) further contended that Plath's use of symbols such as the bell jar serves to embody the duality of confinement and resilience. It traps Esther within her own thoughts but also becomes a measure of her gradual healing. Therefore, symbolism in The Bell Jar not only reveals Esther's psychological struggle but also critiques the societal forces that confine women's identities and highlights their resistance to traditional roles.

ISSN: 3080-1567 - https://doi.org/10.54878/mnqoxj87

Overall, this study confirms that The Bell Jar adheres strongly to psychological realism through confessional narrative, rich symbolism, deep interior monologues, and the profound exploration of Esthers' psychological complexity within oppressive social structures. Plath's depiction of Esther's emotional instability, ambition, and fragmented identity exemplifies personal experience shaped by culture and social pressures. This demonstrates the intricate interplay between individual psyche and external expectations.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar illustrates the conflict between societal expectations and personal freedom in Esther's life. It explores how Plath utilizes psychological realism as a narrative technique to reveal Esther's experiences and critique socio-cultural pressures imposed on women in the 1950s. In addition, the study analyzes the use of symbolism in representing Esther's struggles with both identity and mental health. Qualitative and contextual approaches were employed to analyze the text, focusing on its context, themes, meaning and symbols. The findings unveil that The Bell Jar exposed tension between societal expectations and personal freedom through imposed social expectations and gender roles and Esthers' confinement and loss of self. Her ongoing struggle to discover her own identity further illustrates how these pressures limited her freedom and complicate her path toward self-understanding. Plath critiques socio-cultural pressures imposed on women by highlighting the unequal standards and how women resistance is framed as mental illness. She utilized symbols such as the bell jar, the fig tree to externalize Esther's inner psychological struggle and fragmented sense of identity.

These findings show how The Bell Jar depicts the impact of gender expectations and social norms on psychological distress. This correlation bears evidence to the critical role of literature as a vehicle for exploring the effects of cultural pressures on one's quest for identity and mental well-being. However, the study is exclusively limited to The Bell Jar by Sylivia Plath and the findings are limited to Plath's cultural context and time period. Therefore, a comparative approach in future research could provide deeper insights into whether themes of isolation, loss of identity, gender roles, double standards, and confinement are shared across Plath's other literary works. Such an approach will situate The Bell Jar within a broader literary and cultural framework.

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