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The Fragmented Self: Female Identity and Mental Health in *The Bell Jar*

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Dedication

To my family, who have always been my biggest pillar; to my little brother, who is always by my side; to my dad, who is constantly making sacrifices for us; and to my mom, who is my best friend and biggest supporter.

Abstract

This academic paper offers deep insight into the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. It analyzes how women were expected to behave and how they were treated in return by those around them. Esther was a young woman who craved a different life than the one those around her had. Using the sociological approach, this research will analyze what the American dream society looked like in the 1950s.

The Bell Jar is still a very popular feminist book. It offers insight into what the life of a woman looked like. It explores themes of gender roles, mental health, womanhood, social pressure and loss of identity. Women are still able to connect with Esther even though many years have passed since it was written.

In the story Esther is constantly pushed to fulfill roles she never wished to take on, going against what was expected of women, Esther wanted to be independent, without a husband or children. The constant pressure eventually affected her, and it reflected in her mental health. Esther develops anxiety and depression and later on, she tries to kill herself on different occasions, but she never succeeds.

This research will analyze how her character changes throughout the story, confronting different situations and what were the exact reasons that affected her mental health and why she behaved the way she did.

Resumen

Este documento académico ofrece un análisis profundo de *La Campana de Cristal*, una novela de Sylvia Plath. Esta investigación analiza los estándares que la sociedad esperaba que las mujeres alcanzaran y cómo eran tratadas por aquellos a su alrededor. Esther era una mujer joven que anhelaba una vida diferente a la de las personas que la rodeaban. Con la ayuda de un enfoque sociológico esta investigación explorará cómo se veía la sociedad americana en 1950.

La Campana de Cristal sigue siendo un libro feminista muy popular; ofrece la oportunidad de ver el mundo como una mujer de los años 50. La novela abarca temas de roles de género, salud mental, feminidad, presión social y pérdida de identidad. A pesar de que han pasado varios años desde que el libro fue publicado, las mujeres aún son capaces de identificarse y conectar con Esther.

Durante la historia Esther es constantemente presionada por la sociedad para cumplir roles que ella nunca deseó ejercer. Esther, rechazando los estándares que la sociedad imponía a las mujeres, quería ser independiente, sin la necesidad de tener un esposo o hijos. Sin embargo, la presión constante sí logró desestabilizarla, viéndose reflejada en su salud mental. Esther desarrolló ansiedad y depresión, y finalmente trató de suicidarse en distintas ocasiones.

Esta investigación analizará el desarrollo de Esther a lo largo la historia. Analizando la manera en que se enfrenta a diferentes situaciones y considerando cuáles fueron las razones por la que su salud mental se deterioró tanto.

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Chapter I

Introductory Framework

The *Bell Jar* is still considered one of the most popular feminist novels. The novel develops topics and experiences in a young woman's life that are still relatable to modern women. The novel explores the journey of Esther Greenwood as a young woman in the 1950s. Esther was a girl who knew she did not want to settle for a domestic life, she wanted more. Therefore, this mentality created a main character who went against the norms and what society expected from her. In addition, the author of the novel explores the relation between what society expects from Esther and her mental health.

This research wants to understand, which roles exactly was Esther expected to fulfil, how was the 1950s American society, and, to explore the societal pressures and how it affected young girls' identity. By exploring these themes, this research will offer insight into 1950s American society and how was the life of women in that period.

1.1 Problem Statement

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath narrates the journey of a 19-year-old girl as she discovers herself. In addition, the novel explores themes of womanhood and mental health. Moreover, this book is well known for its feminist connotation, because Esther, the main character goes against the social norms placed on women. Some people tend to minimize the novel as just the story of a young girl who struggles with mental health; however, this analysis will provide a deeper insight on what it meant to be a woman in the 1950s, by taking into consideration the whole context of the novel.

1.2 Objectives of the Investigation

1.2.1 General Objective

To analyze female identity through the character of Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

- To explore the social expectations placed on women in 1953
- To examine the gender roles portrayed in the novel
- To analyze themes of social expectations, mental health, and womanhood

1.3 Justification of the Study

Mental health struggles have been overlooked for years. In the 1950s, people thought that struggling was an option and that people could recover whenever they wanted to. Painful procedures and carefree doctors only made the situation worse. Women struggles were even more minimized. Women could not struggle because in the eyes of society, women's lives were very easy, as getting married and giving birth, that was their only purpose. Therefore, the research aims to explore the themes of mental health, womanhood, female identity, gender roles, and patriarchal society.

The novel narrates the story of a young girl in 1950s American society. With this research her struggles and experiences will be clearer. It will help to understand the reasons behind her actions and how society affected her mental health. The themes developed throughout the novel are still relevant today, which will help the reader to connect more with her journey. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to analyze *The Bell Jar* through a sociological approach, as it will allow the researcher to understand why a young girl in the 1950s was victim of social expectations, the stigma around mental health, and gender roles, while also taking into consideration how the author's personal life and experiences influenced the story and the way it is perceived by the reader. The social expectations placed on women in the 1950s are still present today, just in a more subtle way. Women must overcome challenges in their way of being independent and are constantly being shamed for their decisions. It seems that the more women push to be equal to men, the more society tries to hold them back.

1.4 Antecedents

1.4.1 No hay Salud sin Salud Mental by Henriette Raventós

The author of this article is Henriette Raventós, a professor at the University of Costa Rica. This article was published in *Revista Costarricense de Psicología*. As already mentioned, the article comes from Costa Rica and it created an impact due to its honesty regarding the

stigmatization of mental health and how many people in society, including doctors, do not really take the matter seriously. This article helps this researcher to highlight the importance of mental health and that it is crucial to receive the correct information regarding different struggles. In the article, it mentions how doctors do not take their time with patients and do what they think is the best without considering the patient's opinion, that is exactly what happened to Esther.

1.4.2 Mental Health in Young People in Costa Rica by Johanna Astrid Arce Sancho

The author of this document is Johanna Astrid Arce Sancho. She graduated from The University of Costa Rica. The document was published in Revista del Consejo de la Persona Joven. It deals with the analysis of the mental health of young people in Costa Rica. Moreover, it helps to gain more knowledge regarding aspects of mental health such as suicide attempt, self-esteem, and how to deal with these situations, which are very important themes developed in the story.

1.4.3 Marriage and Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* by Ebba Carlstein

This thesis was written by Ebba Carlstein, student at Linköping University in 2023. In this document, Carlstein highlights the gender expectations present in the novel while also exploring the concepts of motherhood and marriage and how they are developed in the story. Moreover, this document will help to understand more about the 1950s society and how the life of women was at the time. The author highlights the double standards of society when it comes to men and women. Struggles and expectations are explained with examples from the novel and the different female characters.

1.4.4 The Feminist Theme - Critical Exploration of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, by Sonia Rathore

This review was written by Sonia Rathore, student at Maria-Curie Skłodowska University in Poland. This document reviews all the themes present in the novel through a feminist perspective by exploring characters and situations. This document is important for this research because it analyzes the themes by focusing on women's struggle with gender roles, the search for autonomy, feminism, marriage, sex, and the rebellion against social norms.

1.4.5 Mind versus Body: The Representation of Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* by Garima Sharma

This document was written by Garima Sharma, student at Chaudhary Charan Singh University in India. This article describes Esther's rise into mental illness. It mentions how societal expectations affected her and the medicalization of mental health. It also mentions how Sylvia's personal life affected the experiences the character has. This document will allow to understand the reason behind some of Esther's actions and why she does the things she does and takes the decisions she takes. It describes how Esther's mental health deteriorates as the story goes by.

1.5 Scopes

Overview of 1950s American society and gender expectations. In the 1950s women were expected to stay home, while the husband was working. This made the man the only provider of the family. Women had very limited options regarding who they wanted to become in the future. They were expected to work for a man, not to be independent, become mothers and wives.

Societal pressure and its effect on young women's identities. The constant pressure of being told how to behave, act, think and be, made it impossible for young women to develop their identities. This constant pressure made them feel as if they were forced to fulfill other people's expectations instead of being the woman they wanted to be.

Different portrayals of womanhood. Just by being women the characters were experiencing womanhood. In the novel, there are many characters who embody different portrayals of what it meant to be a woman in the 1950s. Some of them were mothers, wives, students, and housewives.

How mental health affects identity, autonomy, and choices. Mental health is a strong theme developed by Plath. As the story develops, the main character's mental health gets worse, and it affects her whole life. She is unable to enjoy and do the things she was one of the best at and she is no longer in the correct mental state to take decisions.

Self-definition and independence. As mentioned before, the main character's mental health affects her whole life, and that includes the way she perceives herself and her independence. She cannot recognize herself anymore at some points of the story and is forced to depend on others to do normal things.

Chapter II

Theoretical Framework

The *Bell Jar* is the only novel Sylvia Plath published. Many people considered it a feminist novel; however, there are more aspects that should be analyzed. The novel develops themes of social expectations, gender roles, mental health, and womanhood. The purpose of this paper is to understand how Sylvia Plath's personal experiences influenced her writing, the gender roles and social expectations of the 50s, how mental health can affect identity and womanhood, and the feminist perspective in the novel.

2.1 Literary Theories

Literary theories are the techniques and principles readers employ when they want to understand a piece of literature at a deeper level. Literary theories have different approaches which can help the reader to analyze race, class, and gender. These approaches take into consideration the text itself and the life of the author. In another words, a literary theory analyzes the connection between the written work and the author; therefore, it must be taken into consideration the culture, place, and time it was created (Brewton, n.d.) This research will use the literary theory called gender criticism.

2.1.1 Gender Criticism

Gender criticism is a literary theory which analyzes gender beyond its literal meaning, the purpose of gender criticism is to understand how gender affects the creation and reception of literary work. Moreover, this theory suggests that power is more than men dominating women, it suggests that power has many layers (Hasa, 2019). This study uses gender criticism theory to analyze the power dynamics present in the novel.

2.2 Literary Approaches

Literary approach, according to Melchoir Antoine, refers to "Various strategies used to understand and analyze a piece of literary writing. These approaches can range from traditional approaches, where you consider the basics such as character, setting, themes, and plot to more

avant-garde approaches” (2023), In other words, an approach is a perspective which people use to analyze specific aspects of a literature piece.

2.2.1 Sociological Approach

There are many approaches people can use to analyze different works; however, this study will employ the sociological approach. The sociological approach, according to Dr Kiran Sharma (2018) explores

The relationship between the artist and society. As such, sociological critics argue that literary works should not be isolated from the social context in which they are embedded. The study of literature with the discipline of sociology integrates a concern for meaning and the unique properties inherent in literary texts, reflecting the economics, attitude, moral and religion of the society that produced the texts. Each society, interconnected and independent, yet distinct and diverse is influenced by the literature, for there are innumerable instances exemplifying the co-relation of life and literature. (p.1)

The use of the sociological approach in this research will allow it to analyze different aspects of the story and the author’s personal life.

2.2.1.1 Gender Roles and Social Expectations in the 1950s

Women were expected to be nothing but a mother and a wife. Therefore, if they wanted to work, they needed to work for someone else. This conservative environment, in which women were seen as less than men, did not want women in positions of power. Society wanted women to be dependent on their husbands and could not earn their own money, because a person who controls their money, is a person who controls their lifestyle. Society did not want that, at least not for women. People wanted women to get married and have children, and society made them believe that this lifestyle was the correct one for them. Through Esther, the reader can see the life of a young girl who refuses to follow the norms.

2.2.1.2 The stigma around mental illness in the 1950s

This period was not a good time for mental health. People with mental issues were usually isolated in asylums and subjected to useless treatments, which kept many people away from receiving help because it was believed that mental issues were incurable (Moore, n.d.). In the

novel, Esther sought for help; however, the doctor did not seem interested in helping her. After two sessions, the doctor decided Esther should do electroshock therapy, which she described as a horrible experience.

Since the novel under analysis took place in the 50s, it is important to make an overview of 1950s American society and gender expectations. The culture of the 50s is the foundation to modern American society, expecting women to fulfill certain roles, racism, and conservative capitalistic rigidity. Women were expected to stay home and become mothers of at least two children. In other words, the husband went to work every day, and women were expected to stay home and prepare food, clean the house, and raise the children (Whipple, 2024). In the novel, there are a variety of female characters who follow this expectation; becoming mothers and being the wife of a man, as it was their only motivation in life. That is what they have prepared for since they were young girls. The main character of the novel, Esther, goes completely against those social norms. She does not want to get married or have children and is studying to be independent.

2.3 Importance of Literary Analysis

Literature is a fundamental part of society; by doing an analysis, people learn new things not only about others, but also things about themselves. When a person goes beyond the literal meaning of a book and allows themselves to go even deeper and explore characters, situations, symbols, motifs, and themes, they are developing their brains in unimaginable ways.

2.4 Themes, Symbols, and Motifs

2.4.1 Theme

The theme is the main idea or message explored through a story. A narrative can develop many themes at the same time. The themes of a story usually go according to the genre of the story (Fiveable, 2024). Themes can be found in movies, books, poems, shows, and more.

2.4.2 What is a Theme in Literature

In literature, a theme is a central idea. The theme is the struggle that appears in the story as the characters pursue their goals. It is often related to complex questions and conflicts, usually regarding identity, philosophy, or morality (Bushnell, 2021). In *The Bell Jar* the themes start to be

more present as the novel goes on. To identify the themes of a story, the reader should analyze the plot, the characters, and the author's opinions on diverse subjects. Every written work has at least one theme, as it is crucial to the development of any story (Lombardi, 2025). You cannot write a story without developing at least one theme.

2.4.2.1 Gender Roles

Gender roles are a set of attitudes society expects men and women to fulfill (Payne, 2025). Gender roles have been present in the past and continue to play a big role in today's society. For example, a gender role is when someone expects something from a woman just because she is a woman, since not every woman has to be feminine or wants to become a mother. Another example can be, men being expected to be the provider of the family while the wife is the housewife, both women and men are victims of this mindset; however, the consequences that gender roles have on young girls are dangerous. Gender roles can affect a young girl's confidence, the way she views herself and even the path she wishes to take in the future (Roseline, 2024). Gender roles are a big part of the story. Esther's resistance to traditional roles and expectations. Esther knew she did not wish to settle for a domestic life, maybe when she was a kid, but as a young girl of nineteen years old, that is not what she wanted anymore. Esther's mentality created a young female main character who did not give in to social pressure.

2.4.2.2 Mental Health

Mental health is a term that has become popular these last few years, but what is exactly mental health? According to World Health Organization (2025),

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is a basic human right. Mental health exists on a complex continuum, which is experienced differently from one person to the next. At any one time, a diverse set of individual, family, community and structural factors may combine to protect or undermine mental health. Although most people are resilient, people who are exposed to adverse circumstances are at higher risk of developing a mental health condition. (para. 1-2)

Mental health is a crucial part of the storyline, because this deterioration is what makes Esther the person she becomes. Esther's mental health affected her identity, autonomy, and choices. As Esther started to fall deeply into depression, she stopped sleeping, she wore the same clothes for three weeks, and she stopped bathing. Her mental issues did not allow her to have the freedom she craved for. Esther concluded that she did not wish to live anymore and attempted to kill herself in different occasions; however, she never succeeded.

2.4.2.3 Womanhood

Womanhood is a very extensive word. It can have different meanings depending on the field you are researching into. According to The Britannica Dictionary, womanhood refers to “the state or condition of being an adult woman and no longer a girl” (n.d.). All women are different; therefore, each one experiences a different womanhood than the other. However, there are situations and experiences that are universal, and this allows women to connect with one another and share their stories. Womanhood can be the bond between women which allows them to relate to one another.

In the novel, there are different representations of what it meant to be a woman in the 50s. Esther goes with Buddy to see how a woman gives birth. Esther finds out women were getting drugged, so they could not remember how painful and traumatic the experiences were. In that way, women would not feel scared to have many babies, highlighting the fact that women were seen purely as baby machines. One of Esther's neighbors was a woman who had six children, and Esther said people were constantly judging her for being a mother of so many kids. This is confusing, because society wanted women to give birth to many babies and then shame them because of it. There is a moment where a man tried to suggest that Doreen was a slut, just because she enjoyed her freedom. This shows the double standards women were victims of, considering Doreen did not do anything different than the rest of men. All these situations are an example of the different representations of womanhood, just because they are women.

2.4.2.4 Social Pressure

According to BetterHelp, social pressure is “the influence that people feel from others in their social circle or society at large to act, think, or behave in a certain way” (2025). Social pressure can affect a person's mental health. That is exactly what happened to Esther. Social

pressure has various effects on young women's identities. In the middle of the novel, when Esther returned home, she wished to continue her career as a writer; however, the pressure of being successful made it impossible for her to write. Esther knew she did not want a life like the rest of the women who surrounded her. Therefore, she had no option but to be successful. Being unsuccessful and unmarried at the same time would be unacceptable. That constant pressure gave her anxiety and fear, and later, depression and suicidal thoughts.

2.4.2.5 Loss of identity

Loss of identity is when a person stops doing everything that is used to characterize them, from their attitudes and behaviors to their actions. A person's identity usually includes beliefs, personality, opinions, and even the social role you play. When a person stops behaving like they usually would, it is probably because they are struggling with their identity and the way they view themselves (Salters, 2024). Esther struggled with self-identity; there is a point in the novel where someone says Esther did not know what she wanted to be because she desired to be everything.

Esther struggled to understand herself, from the early chapters. That pressure to be the best writer made her unable to write anything at all. She started to question if she was as good as she thought she was. Eventually, the anxiety made her fall into depression. She could no longer sleep, read, or write. Esther's whole life was writing, and the moment her mental issues kept her away from doing it, her whole life started to crumble apart. Writing was all she was, and when she could not do it anymore, she lost herself.

2.4.2 Symbols

What are symbols in literature? Writers use symbols in their works when they want to represent ideas in a subtle way. A symbol can be anything: objects, places, colors, or animals, to find symbols in a story, it is necessary to analyze everything beyond its literal meaning (MasterClass, 2021). Some symbols can be easier to find than others.

2.4.2.1 The Bell Jar as a Symbol

The symbolism of the bell jar is a metaphor for mental suffocation. Esther no longer knew who she really was, could not connect with people, and was not able to do what she liked the

most. It was like her own body and mind were a cage. She wanted to do what she liked, but her depression did not allow her. This isolated her from others and even isolated from her true self.

2.4.3 Motifs

A motif can be an image, sound, word or symbol which appears repeatedly through the story, an author uses motifs when they wish to highlight the themes being developed (Delf and Williams, 2021). Some motifs can be more noticeable while others require a deeper analysis.

2.4.3.1 Magazines, Newspapers and Media in general as a Motif

There are many moments throughout the story where Esther is reading magazines, newspapers, or just things related to the media. This is important because it helps the reader to see Esther's mindset, and her opinions regarding certain topics. When Esther fell into depression, articles were the only thing she could read without getting overwhelmed by all the letters.

2.5 Author's Biography

Sylvia Plath was an American author. She was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932. In the early years of her life, Plath started to show passion and talent for writing. She published her first poem when she was eight years old and won different prizes, while still in high school. Her most popular works include poems such as *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*. *The Bell Jar* is the only novel she ever published. This novel was published in 1963, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.

The Bell Jar develops the story of a young girl named Esther Greenwood. Even though there are certain parallels between the story of Esther and Sylvia, the book cannot be considered an autobiography in all its extension. Plath married in 1956 to the poet Ted Hughes. They had two children. In 1962, they got divorced due to her husband's infidelity. In February 1963, one month after her novel's publication, Plath took her own life (Ostberg, 2025). The fact that she took her life shortly after the publication of the book just shows how much the novel meant to her.

As mentioned before, the novel cannot be considered a complete autobiography; however, there are certain details that cannot be ignored. Both Plath and Esther grew up in Boston and lost their dad at an early age. Both won a scholarship to attend University and worked at a magazine.

When Plath published her novel, she did it under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas, because she did not believe the novel was worth much. She also did not want people around her to read the novel and identify with the characters. Esther's struggles with mental health can be a direct mirror of Sylvia Plath herself, both went under electroshock therapy, and Plath admitted that she sometimes felt as if she was trapped in a Bell Jar (Ames, 2005). Moreover, in the novel, when Esther is writing her book, she chose the name Elaine for the main character, because it has 6 letters just like Esther, which can be a symbolism to Plath herself because Esther and Sylvia also have 6 letters.

2.6 Plot of the Book

The Bell Jar narrates the story of a young girl named Esther Greenwood. She was a 19-year-old girl living in New York thanks to a scholarship. Esther wished to be a writer and follow her own dreams instead of giving the social expectations placed on her. However, as the story develops the reader realizes that Esther was a more complex character than she appeared to be at first glance. She knew who she wanted to be, but her constant fear of not being able to fulfill those dreams made her anxious and depressed.

Being a woman in the 1950s was not an easy job. Throughout the book, there are different female characters who embodied different social expectations. When her scholarship ended and she returned home, she fell into depression and was unable to read and write. She started to develop fear and suicidal thoughts. As time went by, she was not able to sleep or shower. Her mother tried to search for help, but the doctors did not really pay attention to her problems. She tried to kill herself on different occasions but never succeeded. She got taken to an asylum where they treated her with electroshock therapy. She described it as a horrible experience. The book ends with Esther leaving the asylum and being "happy". The end of the book is not a happy one, but it is not sad either, it is just an ending, implying a new beginning in her life.

Chapter III

Methodological Framework

3.1 Research Approach

3.1.1 Qualitative Approach

According to Weng Marc Lim, a qualitative approach is a type of research which “with its emphasis on context, existence, experience, perspective, meaning, and subjectivity, offers a unique lens through which to explore and interpret the complexities of social phenomena” (Lim, 2024). A qualitative approach is going to be employed in this research to allow a deep literary and contextual analysis of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. This approach focuses on interpreting hidden meanings in the novel, identifying the themes developed throughout the story, and understanding the novel by taking into consideration its historical, social, and cultural context.

3.2 Research Design

A research design is the plan the researcher follows to obtain information and analyze it. The research design allows the researcher to keep the investigation in a straight line instead of going out of the way and losing the objective of the study (Sreekumar, 2025). Moreover, the research design is fundamental to develop a clear and understandable conclusion.

3.2.1 Research Method

Research methods are procedures which, according to Mina Zarei, “collect, analyze, and interpret data to answer research questions or test hypotheses. They provide a structured approach to investigating phenomena, ensuring that findings are valid, reliable, and reproducible” (Zarei, 2025). There are three research methods, qualitative research, which analyzes human behavior and experiences instead of focusing on numerical information; quantitative research, which analyzes numerical information; and mixed method research, which analyzes human behavior and numerical information (Zarei, 2025). This research adapts a qualitative method in order to analyze *The Bell Jar* with a deep insight.

3.2.2 Textual and Contextual Analysis

The primary method involves a close reading and literary analysis of the novel *The Bell Jar*, supported by historical and cultural contextualization. This research will also use articles, documents, and essays to correctly understand the themes, characters, and context. Therefore, in this way, the analysis will be deeper.

3.3 Information Sources

There are many information sources such as: books, articles, journals, interviews, basically any place where you can obtain information related to the topic of your research. The researcher can choose which type of source functions better according to the type of investigation being conducted (Metropolia Library, 2025). There are primary and secondary sources.

3.3.1 Primary Sources

According to Harvard Library, “Primary sources provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic under investigation. They are created by witnesses or recorders who experienced the events or conditions being documented” (Harvard Library, 2025). The primary source of this research is *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. This novel offers insight into the 1950s American society from the perspective of someone who experienced it.

3.3.2 Secondary Sources

According to Harvard Library, “Secondary sources were created by someone who did not experience first-hand or participate in the events or conditions you are researching” (Harvard Library, 2025). The secondary sources of this research are literary criticism articles and the biographical information of Sylvia Plath. All these secondary sources analyze the primary sources from different perspectives.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

According to QuestionPro, “Data collection tools are essential instruments used in research. Those enable you to collect and store data from various sources. They come in various forms, ranging from simple paper questionnaires to advanced software applications” (QuestionPro, n.d.). As mentioned, these instruments are crucial for the correct development of

an investigation. The most popular tools are interviews, surveys, and observation (QuestionPro, n.d.). This research does not employ the use of any of the tools mentioned before.

3.4.1 Population and Sample

Population refers to a complete team of people or objects that people analyze in order to obtain conclusions related to the topic being analyzed; on the other hand, a sample is a filtered group from the population (Unity Environmental University, n.d.) This research is aimed at people who want to understand and analyze *The Bell Jar* from a different perspective, considering the period it was written in and Plath's mental health, as well as how Plath's personal life affected her work, and how she reflected herself in the novel.

3.4.2 Data analysis procedures

According to Bella Williams, a table-for content analysis “enhances this analysis, organizing findings in a clear and accessible format. It helps researchers visualize and compare themes, making it easier to draw conclusions” (Bella Williams, n.d.) This research will use tables in order to analyze the themes, symbols, and motifs present in the novel.

3.5 Collection Data Processes and Data Analysis

As mentioned before, this research will use tables to show the collected information. This is an illustration of how they will look like.

segment of the book	conclusion obtained

3.5.1 Table for Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

3.5.1.1 Chart for Themes

Theme	segment of the book	conclusion obtained

3.5.1.2 Chart for Motifs

Motif	segment of the book	conclusion obtained

3.5.1.3 Chart for Symbols

Symbol	segment of the book	conclusion obtained

3.5.2 Chart for Literary Theory

Literary theory	Extract from the book	Researcher's explanation

3.5.3 Chart for the Approach

Approach	Extract from the book	Researcher's explanation

3.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis is organized according to the specific objectives of the study. This research adapts a qualitative approach; therefore, the analysis is accomplished through the study of specific segments from *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. First, to explore the social expectations placed on women in 1953, this research studies the roles women were expected to fulfill and Esther's resistance to those expectations. In the 1950s, women were expected to dedicate their entire lives to serving men, from working for them to getting married and becoming a housewife. These expectations played a crucial part in Esther's journey because she did not want to have this lifestyle, she wanted to be independent and successful on her own.

Second, to examine the gender roles portrayed in the novel. This analysis explores Esther's journey towards self-definition and independence. Esther was expected to give her career up to take care of a man or to work for a man instead of being independent. These are only two examples of the many presented in the novel. Gender roles are highlighted in the story because they are a fundamental part of Esther's journey.

Third, to analyze themes of social expectations, mental health, and womanhood. This study examines Esther's mental health struggles and their connection to social pressure, the stigma around mental health in the 1950s, the portrayals of womanhood through different characters. Esther ascended slowly into madness thanks to the constant pressure she felt, because she knew that if she did not become a successful writer then she had no other choice than to surrender to the gender roles she despised so much. Esther's mental health struggles were not handled in the correct way, as the people around her, at some point, thought that being mentally ill was her choice and something she could stop at any moment. Throughout the book, there are many female characters which represent what it was like to be a woman in the 50s.

Chapter IV

Data Analysis

In this chapter, the reader can find the results obtained through the data collection instruments previously presented in Chapter III. The results regarding themes, motifs, symbols, literary theory, and the approach will be presented through tables with its respective conclusion obtained from different segments of the book. All the information is organized in the best way possible.

4.1 Approaches to the Investigation

This investigation employs the sociological approach. The sociological approach will help this investigation to analyze the book beyond its literal meaning and take into consideration the whole context of the story, such as the time it was created and the author's personal life. During the 1950s, there were high expectations placed on both women and men. Men were expected to work and provide for the family, while the wife should step into the role of a housewife who cooked and took care of the children, dedicating her whole life to the service of those around her. It is also important to mention that in that time, people did not really believe in the importance of mental health; consequently, people with a mental illness were often dismissed and treated in an inappropriate way by doctors and society in general.

4.1.1 Chart for the approach

Approach	Extract from the book	Researcher's Explanation
Sociological approach	The whole time I was talking, Doctor Gordon bent his head as if he were praying, and the only noise apart from the dull, flat voice was the tap, tap, tap of Doctor Gordon's pencil at the same point on the green blotter, like a stalled walking-	In this scene, Esther hoped to receive help from someone who she thought was going to listen to and analyze her situation; however, the doctor completely ignored her the whole time and changed the subject as fast as he could. In

	<p>stick. When I had finished, Doctor Gordon lifted his head. "Where did you say you went to college?" Baffled, I told him. I didn't see where college fitted in. "Ah!"</p> <p>Doctor Gordon leaned back in his chair, staring into the air over my shoulder with a reminiscent smile. I thought he was going to tell me his diagnosis, and that perhaps I had judged him too hastily and too unkindly. But he only said, "I remember your college well. I was up there, during the war. They had a WAC station, didn't they? Or was it WAVES?" I said I didn't know. "Yes, a WAC station, I remember now. I was doctor for the lot, before I was sent overseas. My, they were a pretty bunch of girls."</p> <p>Doctor Gordon laughed.</p> <p>Then, in one smooth move, he rose to his feet and strolled towards me round the corner of his desk. I wasn't sure what he meant to do, so I stood up as well. Doctor</p>	<p>the 50s, this was a usual situation, as mental health was dismissed and ignored by people who apparently were trained to help.</p>
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	Gordon reached for the hand that hung at my right side and shook it. “See you next week, then.” (chapter 11)	
Sociological approach	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. 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. (chapter 7)	Buddy did not take Esther’s career seriously; he only viewed it as a hobby. Therefore, it was expected of Esther to be always dedicated to her children and husband. This shows how women’s interests were not really taken into consideration.

Table 1 illustrates examples of the sociological approach found in the book and their corresponding explanation. Researcher’s creation

4.2 Theories vs Literary Work

This investigation employs a literary theory previously explained named gender criticism, which analyzes the way gender affects the creation and reception of literature pieces. Moreover, it also suggests that power is more than just men being dominant and women being submissive, power is a word which contains many layers to it and it’s more profound that it appears to be.

Literary theory	Segment of the book	Conclusion obtained
Gender criticism	My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand	Esther is a character who had big expectations for her future; in her eyes, working for a man would be setting for

	<p>was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter. (chapter 7)</p>	<p>less than what she wanted. However, many women could not even work for a man because they were not allowed to study and work. Even though Esther did not realize it, she had privileges and more power than others.</p>
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Table 2 illustrates examples of power dynamics found in the book and their corresponding explanation. Researcher's creation

4.3 Themes, Symbols, and Motifs

4.3.1 Themes

Theme	Segment of the book	Conclusion obtained
Gender Roles	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. (chapter 7)	This fragment shows the double standard, as women had to be pure until marriage, while men had the option to do what they wanted.
Gender Roles	"What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security," and, "What a man is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from," (chapter 6)	It pushes the idea that a woman needs a man to be secure because they could not be independent.
Gender Roles	I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what	Buddy's mother had a degree, yet she was a housewife who cleaned and cooked all day

	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. (chapter 7)	because that was what society expected from her; in other words, to be a mother and a wife.
Mental health	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 my throat and I'd cry for a week. (chapter 9)	Esther had been keeping her emotion hidden for so long that the tiniest trigger would be able to initiate a mental breakdown.
Mental health	I hadn't washed my hair for three weeks, either. I hadn't slept for seven nights. (chapter 11)	Esther's bad mental health made it impossible for her to do very simple activities.
Mental health	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." (chapter 12)	Esther's mother believed that a mental illness was optional; in other words, that Esther was able to determinate when she wanted to get better. This shows the stigma around mental health in those years.
Womanhood	best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of	Men wanted to have sex, but at the same time they viewed it as something dirty. Women who were manipulated by men into doing it, would be shamed by

	<p>course 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 by making her life miserable. (chapter 7)</p>	<p>society while men were free from any social judgment.</p>
Womanhood	<p>I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (chapter 6)</p>	<p>In this fragment, Esther was talking about how women would get drugged when they were giving birth, so they did not remember how painful the experience was. This shows how women were seen purely as baby machines without taking into consideration their own opinion. This is something all pregnant women went through.</p>
Womanhood	<p>I tried to imagine what it would be like if Constantin were my husband. It would mean getting up at seven and</p>	<p>In this segment, Esther described how marriages were expected to look like. The husband left the house to work</p>

	<p>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.</p> <p>(chapter 7)</p>	<p>and live his own life, while the wife stood home all day with the expectation of serving her husband as soon as he came from work.</p>
Social pressure	<p>Buddy's mother had even arranged for me to be given a job as a waitress at the TB sanatorium that summer so Buddy wouldn't be lonely. She and Buddy couldn't understand why I chose to go to New York City instead.</p> <p>(chapter 2)</p>	<p>People expected Esther to give up an amazing opportunity in New York just to take care of Buddy. They got her the job to pressure her into staying.</p>
Social pressure	<p>My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and coming</p>	<p>Esther did not want to work for a man; she wanted to be independent. However, her mother kept insisting. This constant pressure affected her mental health later on.</p>

	<p>young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter. The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way.</p> <p>I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters. (chapter 7)</p>	
Loss of identity	<p>Would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play. But the person in the mirror was paralysed and too stupid to do a thing. (chapter 12)</p>	<p>She could not identify herself with the person in front of the mirror.</p>
Loss of identity	<p>“I can’t sleep. I can’t read.” I tried to speak in a cool, calm way, but the zombie rose up in my throat and choked me off. (chapter 10)</p>	<p>Reading and writing was a big part of Esther’s identity, and when she could not do it anymore, she lost herself.</p>

Table 3 illustrates examples of gender roles, mental health, womanhood, social pressure, and loss of identity in the book and their corresponding explanation. Researcher’s creation

4.3.2 Motifs

Motif	Segment of the book	Conclusion obtained
Magazines and newspaper	<p>The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers. (chapter 1)</p>	<p>Esther read the news about people being electrocuted and said how much she hated the idea of being electrocuted herself. Later, Esther was a victim of electroshock</p>

		therapy, which she described as a horrible experience.
Magazines and newspaper	In an article my mother cut out of the Reader's Digest and mailed to me at college. This article was written by a married woman lawyer with children and called "In Defense of Chastity". It gave all the reasons a girl shouldn't sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married. The main point of the article was that a man's world is different from a woman's world (chapter 7)	When thinking about the article she read, Esther mentioned that she did not think like that. From her perspective, being pure and virgin, lost its meaning a long time ago.

Table 4 illustrates examples of the motifs in the book and their corresponding explanation. Researcher's creation

4.3.3 Symbols

Symbol	A segment of the book	The conclusion obtained from it
The Bell jar	The air of the bell jar waded round me and I couldn't stir. (chapter 15)	This Bell Jar does not exist; it is a symbolism for her depression and mental illness.
The Bell jar	To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream. (chapter 20)	The bell jar represents her bad mental health, that is why she describes being in it as being dead.

Table 5 illustrates examples of symbols in the book and their corresponding explanation. Researcher's creation

Chapter V

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter, the readers are going to find the conclusions of the investigation, which were obtained from the data collection instruments.

5.1 Purpose of the Conclusion

The purpose of the conclusion is to gather all the results obtained through the investigation in the best way possible, so it is more understandable and easier to read.

5.2 Conclusions

5.2.1 To explore the social expectations placed on women in 1953

Women in the 50s were expected to be housewives or to work for a man. It was not common to see women in positions of power, as it was a rare occurrence. Esther wanted with her whole heart to be the exception, since she desperately wanted to be someone. Throughout the story, there are different moments where Esther imagined herself living an average life, that is getting married and having children. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, Esther was another nineteen-year-old girl who wanted to be different but still craved to be accepted. In those settings, it is clear that she did not want under any circumstances to surrender herself to social expectations and that she did not have any other option but to be successful on her own. Those years were hard for women because it seemed like no matter what they did, it was never going to be good enough for others. Women and men were held under different standards and were judged differently by society.

5.2.2 To examine the gender roles portrayed in the novel

As mentioned before, women and men were held under different standards, and in the novel, there are a lot of examples that prove it. The roles the women and men had, were really differentiated. Men could enjoy of a free life and they could have as many lovers as they wanted. Women, on the other hand, were expected not to mess with any men and be pure until marriage. Men were expected to be in positions of power, be the head of the family, and become the biggest

source of income in the house. In contrast, women were expected to be housewives, or to get a career to work for men and give up their work as soon as they became mothers. To summarize, women were expected to be at the service of men.

5.2.3 To analyze themes of social expectations, mental health, and womanhood

Social expectations, mental health, and womanhood are the central themes of the novel, as all the conflicts Esther went through were built on the different expectations society placed on her, her struggle with mental health, and her journey as a young woman in a patriarchal society. These themes are deeply intertwined. Esther was a woman; therefore, society expected her to fulfill certain roles, even if she did not feel ready or she simply did not want to. This constant pressure imposed by others leads her to develop anxiety and, later on, depression.

5.3 Restatement of the Research Question

As it is already clear, the 1950s American society expected women to serve men, whether through work or marriage. The reason a young girl in the 1950s was victim of social expectations, the stigma surrounding mental health, and gender roles, was because being a woman was not an easy task. With misogyny at the root of it all; the believe that women had to accomplish certain roles in order to be celebrated created a fracture in Esther's life. The constant pressure imposed by others made her doubt her ability to be successful on her own. It made her scared of failure and of having to give up her dreams just to reach the standards people projected onto her. Esther knew her mental health was deteriorating, and when she tried to look for help, people treated her horribly, from the doctors to her own family. Within the context of the story, Esther's greatest mistake was wanting a different life for herself.

5.4 Recommendations

The researcher recommends that anyone who wants to enjoy and understand this book, should gain deep insight into how 1950s American society functioned and how neglected mental health used to be at the time. When we read the book from a modern perspective, we may find Esther exaggerated or dramatic; however, we need to remember that the 50s were only a good time to be alive if you were a white man.

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