



# Narcissism as a Defense Mechanism: A Trauma- Psychoanalytic Reading of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the concept of narcissism as a defense mechanism as been depicted in Sylvia Plath's work "The Bell Jar". It also analyzes the protagonist, Esther Greenwood's, internal issues from a psychological standpoint, highlighting the influence of societal expectations and mental illness on her disjointed identity and obsessive self-reflection. It is examined the conflict between Esther's desire for autonomy and societal pressures to conform to traditional female roles, showing how these tensions intensify narcissistic traits such as perfectionism, indecision, and self-alienation, which are employed as a defense mechanism. Kernberg (1993) theory of the psychodynamic model of narcissism and Judith Herman's Trauma (1992) are utilized focusing on the narrative themes, symbolic imagery, and Esther's internal monologue. The analysis also demonstrates how Plath's depiction of psychological misery transcends individual pathology to attack the cultural factors influencing women's lives. The research validates *The Bell Jar* as a significant literary piece that encapsulates the intricacies of female identity and mental health under a patriarchal framework.

## Keywords

Narcissistic traits, psychological illness, societal expectations, psychodynamics

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## النجسية كآلية دفاع: قراءة تحليلية نفسية للصدمة في رواية

### "الناقوس الزجاجي" لسيلفيا بلات

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### المستخلص

تحلل هذه الدراسة مفهوم النجسية كآلية دفاع كما هو موضح في رواية سيلفيا بلات "الناقوس الزجاجي". تحلل الدراسة القضايا الداخلية التي تواجهها بطلة الرواية، إستر جرينوود، من وجهة نظر نفسية، وتسلط الضوء على تأثير التوقعات المجتمعية والمرض العقلي على هويتها غير المتماسكة وتأملها الذاتي الوسواسي. كما تدرس الصراع بين رغبة إستر في الاستقلال والضغط المجتمعية للامتثال للأدوار النسائية التقليدية، وتسلط الضوء على كيفية تكثيف هذه التوترات للسمات النجسية مثل الكمال والتردد والاعتراب الذاتي. والتي تستخدم كآلية دفاع. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على نظرية كيرنبيرج (١٩٩٣) للنموذج النفسي الديناميكي للنجسية ونظرية الصدمة للكاتب جوديث هيرمان (١٩٩٢) مع التركيز على الموضوعات السرديّة والصور الرمزية والمونولوج الداخلي لإستير. ويوضح التحليل أيضاً كيف أن تصوير بلات للبوّس النفسي يتجاوز الأمراض الفردية لمهاجمة العوامل الثقافية التي تؤثر على حياة المرأة. يؤكد هذا البحث أن "الناقوس الزجاجي" هي قطعة أدبية مهمة تلخص تعقيدات الهوية الأنثوية والصحة العقلية في إطار أبوي.

### الكلمات المفتاحية

السمات النجسية، المعاناة النفسية، التوقعات المجتمعية، المنظور الديناميكي النفسي.

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## 1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is an American poet and novelist who hold an iconic status in the American literary imagination. Her writings persist in inspiring, captivating, and resonating with readers across borders and generations, even posthumously. She possesses an inherent passion for various subjects during her upbringing in the eastern United States; yet, as she aged, she relinquishes strict provincialism and limited human prejudice. Her battles with mental illness, her turbulent marriage to British poet Ted Hughes, and the tragic circumstances of her death have become integral to her cultural legacy alongside her literary works. Plath engages individuals from many social and cultural backgrounds, and her works possess a lasting allure that captivates readers regardless of class, gender, or nationality.

During her time in London, Plath sought to write a novel she referred to as a 'pot-boiler' in the spring of 1962, coinciding precisely with the intensified examination of psychiatry by Goffman, Szasz, and Laing in the British media. Inspired by notable mental illness novels from the 1950s, Plath involves illustrating the deep solitude faced by persons experiencing a breakdown. She clarifies that mental institutions classify persons as either normal or pathological, but the middle-class establishments in *The Bell Jar* designate as 'mad' those women who diverge from conventional standards of femininity. Plath's literary work encompasses her novel and poetry, establishing a motif of perfection to transcend the psychological processes and dilemmas of the characters (Debata, 2013).

Her novel *The Bell Jar* was written at the time of rapid social change, shaped by the aftermath of the World Wars and the rise of modernist thinking. The cultural climate of this time, especially the expectations for women, contributed to the mental struggles of many. Women were often limited to roles focused on



beauty, marriage, and motherhood, with little room for intellectual or career aspirations (Foster, 2005).

Plath in her novel *The Bell Jar*, she presents the protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood, who has many equals with Plath, such as her difficulty in adapting to New York City, her suicide attempt by an overdose of sleeping pills, and her recovery process that includes electroconvulsive therapy and psychotherapy. She challenges psychiatry by recounting the experiences of a young woman who fluctuates between mental hospitals, meticulously chronicling her mental illness, subsequent hospitalization, and electroconvulsive therapy with near clinical precision. Esther is conflicted between traditional and nontraditional options; she struggles with choices of urban versus rural living, matrimony versus profession, and chastity versus promiscuity. She experienced a psychological condition; she is a woman seeking wholeness, not one who has achieved a secure sense of self.

According to Green (2002), Sylvia Plath is a writer who vividly captures psychological narcissism, particularly through her exploration of identity, self-perception, and psychological health. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath delves into the mind of Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, whose internal conflict regarding her self-worth and constant need for external approval significantly contribute to her psychological decline.

Accordingly, this study is to examine how the narcissism as a defense mechanism reflected in Esther Greenwood's self-perception. The researcher is to answer the following research question: How the narcissism as a defense mechanism is reflected in Esther Greenwood's self-perception?



## 2. Theoretical Background

Narcissism is a psychological trait characterized by an excessive preoccupation with oneself, an inflated feeling of self-importance, and a continual craving for adulation. Individuals exhibiting narcissistic qualities frequently have challenges in forming profound, significant connections and generally lack empathy. Narcissism is influenced by both early life experiences and societal factors. Freud claimed that narcissism originates from early experiences of self-affection (Kernberg, 1975).

Narcissism has been recognized for around 2000 years, originating from the tale of Narcissus in ancient Greece. In this tale, the handsome young hunter Narcissus spurned the affection of the nymph Echo, resulting in the gods condemning him to fall in love with his own reflection. Narcissus's egocentrism ultimately culminated in a sad demise. Consequently, on a metaphorical plane, this primordial myth encapsulates two dimensions of narcissism that are presently under rigorous examination: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. The ancient notion of narcissism was adopted and elaborated upon by psychodynamic theorists, who viewed it as both a self-regulatory mechanism and a personality trait, and it was first classified as a personality disorder in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The idea of narcissism was concurrently modified for research on general, nonclinical personality diversity. (Jauk, & Kanske, 2021)

A core aspect of narcissism is a breakable confidence that depends heavily on outside agreement. Narcissistic individuals seek constant praise and recognition to maintain a positive self-image and may respond with hostility to criticism or perceived threats to their ego. Narcissism has emerged as a hallmark of contemporary society, captivating the attention of the public, media, and literature.

Narcissism affects not only the individual but also their relationships and the society they are part of. Narcissistic people may manipulate others to achieve their



own goals, often hurting others in the process. In society, narcissism is fueled by cultural factors like media portrayals of perfection, individualism, and material success (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Narcissism, similar to other mental diseases or personality traits, is not exclusive to a particular gender or sexual orientation. Narcissism, although primarily recognized in men, is also evident in women. Narcissistic women are equally detrimental and divisive to relationships as their male equivalents. Notwithstanding the parallels, female narcissists receive less discourse than their male counterparts. Freud (1914) posited that women exhibited greater narcissism than males, but in 1985, Irene Philipson investigated the "disproportionate representation of men" as narcissists. She contended that the term pertains to both genders as a personality type and mental disorder, and that gender prejudice must be rectified within the psychological and psychiatric domains (as cited in Perina, 2020)

Kernberg (1993) asserts that the essential elements of personality are not drives, but internal object relations dyads—cognitive-affective units comprising self-representations, object-representations, and their corresponding affects. These units are formed through early interactions with caregivers and gradually become part of the personality's basic structure. The process starts with simple, emotion-based representations and should move toward more complex and unified internal objects.

According to Kernberg, the ego's main job is to bring together different internalized relationships into a single, coherent identity framework. These include bringing together the good and bad effects of how we see ourselves and the things around us. When integration works, the person's self-concept and view of others stay the same, which helps them deal with conflicting feelings and complicated emotional states. When someone fails, their primitive defense mechanisms take over; this leads to the defining traits of personality disorders.



Kernberg (1993) exposes that this disease of narcissism arises from early dysfunctional object connections, leading to negative and conflicted internalized representations of the self and others. The defining defense mechanism of this condition is splitting, a rudimentary approach in which the self and others are perceived as wholly good or wholly terrible. Disappointed by prior relationships, the narcissist establishes a mechanism of self-sufficiency through a pathological symbiosis including the self, the ideal self, and the ideal object. In imagination, the narcissist amalgamates his self-desires with those of others, rendering him independent of external validation.

The study also addresses Judith Herman's Trauma (1992) as a second theory. Herman contends that trauma erodes an individual's intrinsic trust in themselves and others, often fragmenting memories and distorting identity. She explains how traumatic relationships, especially those that involve abuse or confinement, create patterns of control and powerlessness that often lead to dissociation, denial, and long-lasting psychological imprisonment. She identifies the main symptoms of trauma: hyperarousal, intrusion, and restriction. These symptoms manifest in various forms of trauma, encompassing marital violence, childhood abuse, sexual assault, political dread, and warfare. Herman compares the private world of domestic violence to the public world of political terror, saying that both rely on fear, secrecy, and isolation to gain power. Survivors often encounter skepticism or indifference when they articulate their experiences. She asserts that healing requires the reversal of isolation via empowerment, acknowledgment, and interpersonal connection. Herman presents her pivotal three-stage framework for trauma recovery: safety, remembrance and grief, and reconnection. She explains that these stages are cyclical and dialectical, and survivors often have to do things again at a deeper level of integration. Herman's model doesn't offer a one-size-fits-all answer. Instead, it offers a flexible, trauma-informed framework based on clinical expertise and survivor testimonies. Herman



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asserts that rehabilitation cannot begin until the survivor restores a sense of physical and psychological safety. These include basic needs like safe housing, medical care, protection from ongoing violence, and dealing with signs of trauma, such as flashbacks and trouble sleeping. At this point, one of the main goals is to help the survivor regain control, which will help them feel less helpless after the trauma. At this point, treatment should focus on stabilizing the person and helping them take care of themselves instead of exploring their painful feelings (Herman, 1992).

Through Esther Greenwood's character; Plath highlights the psychological impact of societal pressures, especially those imposed on women during the 1950s. Esther's journey in search of her identity leads her to become entangled in a narcissistic desire for validation and the pursuit of an idealized version of herself. This research focuses on how narcissism as defense mechanism is portrayed in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* , particularly through the character of Esther Greenwood. The study will adopt Kernberg (1993) theory of narcissism and Herman's Trauma (1992) .



### 3. Previously Conducted Studies

Several previous studies have explored different themes in *The Bell Jar*, each approaching the subject from a different perspective.

In “**A Psychoanalytical Study of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar**” by Chandran (2016), the study addressed *The Bell Jar* from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. It examined the intricate mind of both Esther and Plath herself. Esther's gradual descent into lunacy stems from her ego's inability to mediate between her id and superego, ultimately resulting in despair and neurosis. The novel can be perceived as Plath's endeavor to seek solace through confessional writing, aiming to elucidate the enigmas of the psyche in the realm of consciousness. Writing might have acted as a form of catharsis. Psychoanalysis is an important tool for understanding the subtleties of a complicated piece of art.

Nagarale's (2018) “**The Exploration of Mental Illness in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar**”, offered an unvarnished portrayal of depression, employing the bell jar metaphor to exemplify the suffocating isolation experienced by individuals confronting mental health issues. It looked at the gender and social norms of the 1950s, focusing on how these things make Esther's mental health worse and make her feel trapped. It also looked at modern mental therapies and how honestly she wrote about suicide. It also looked at how cultural views of sexuality and gender roles affect mental health. Plath gives a critical look at how these things affect mental health..

The study of “**Sex and Success a Feminist Analysis of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar**” by Boffano (2018), analyzed how Plath utilized several male characters encountered by Esther to depict the biases and assumptions linked to male sexuality. It illustrates the utilization of masculine aggression to reinforce male dominance over females. The Bell Jar highlighted the connection between sexuality and success, the central theme of this article. For women, these two concepts are fundamentally contradictory, as sexuality diminishes opportunities



for marriage and professional advancement; a sexually liberated woman in a position of responsibility does not occupy a prestigious status. In contrast, men's sexuality is esteemed in both matrimonial and professional contexts.

The study's findings are overly simplistic in asserting that societal independence is a consequence of sexual freedom. Nevertheless, Sylvia Plath demonstrates how women can attain independence by asserting their right to free expression, particularly about sexual and physiological autonomy. Women continue to encounter discrimination and misconceptions about their sexuality, especially in professional settings, which obstructs their opportunities for success, notwithstanding variations from the preconceptions presented in the book. Closing the gender gap may be achievable through candid discussions regarding women's sexuality and through the scholarly reevaluation of great literature such as *The Bell Jar*.

In "**The Manifestation of Alienation in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar***" by Mustafa (2019), he examined how the male-dominated culture effected on Esther, the main character in *The Bell Jar*. Ester feels alienated and trying to develop her female identity in a patriarchal American setting. She tries to distance herself from the common way of thinking among American women who "idle talk," they think they don't have the power to make a difference in the world. Esther refuses to follow the rules set by society about women roles, especially her way to stay away from her family and the people around her. The study underscored supplementary factors influencing the protagonist's alienation, including her deviation from societal norms and her mother's expectations. The study also demonstrated how psychological trauma, emotional emptiness, and melancholy alienate the protagonist. She lives in a trauma after her father's death, she becomes sad, angry, and crazy. She can't fully enjoy her life because it doesn't have any meaning. Because of this, her condition makes her feel more and more sad, lonely, and hopeless. The study's findings suggest that Esther's distress arises from the



inadequacy of American social life to fulfill the aspirations of an ambitious woman, her idealised perceptions of existence, and her disillusionment with reality.

Farzand (2023) in "**Exploring the Depths of Psychological Struggles: The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath**", analyzed Esther's emotional feelings of despair and disillusionment. Esther Greenwood's descent into psychological turmoil is a compelling account that underscores the profound impact of societal pressures and personal adversities on mental health. The study highlights that there are things along with the pressure from society forces Esther to live in feelings of loneliness and anxiety. The study focuses on how the author chronicles Esther's life, depicting her internship at a prestigious fashion magazine, at the same time addressing her challenges with societal expectations, unmet aspirations, and interpersonal relationships. Anyone who wants to really understand the complicated issues surrounding mental health should read Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar".

Numerous studies illustrate psychological concerns in their works and their impact on a character's psyche, manifesting as an identity crisis stemming from both social and political challenges (Hussein, 2020). While prior studies have explored many psychological issues in *The Bell Jar* from a diverse perspective, this study examines the notion of narcissism as a defense mechanism in psychological theories, specifically utilizing Otto Kernberg (1993) and Herman's Trauma (1992), focusing on the narcissistic characteristics that influence Esther Greenwood's personality. It seeks to analyze her narcissism solely as a personal psychological characteristic. It examines her narcissism as both a defensive strategy and a reaction to social injustice. It examines how the gender norms, cultural constraints, and stringent expectations for women in her century contribute to her fragmented identity.



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## 4. The Practical Part of the Study

### 4.1 Methodology of the Study

The present study is textual analysis; as Caulfield (2019) observed, textual analysis encompasses a wide range of research methodologies employed to describe, interpret, and comprehend texts. A text can yield various types of information, including its literal meaning, subtext, symbolism, assumptions, and underlying beliefs. In this regard: To achieve the objective of the study, which reads: examining how the narcissism as a defense mechanism is reflected in Esther Greenwood's self-perception.

The researcher is to identify the extracts that reflect the narcissism as both a defensive strategy and a reaction to social injustice. The extracts emphasize on the impact of societal expectations and mental illness on Esther Greenwood's self-perception and exposing the struggle between Esther's aspiration for independence and the societal expectations to adhere to conventional female roles.

### 4.2 Textual Analysis

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a captivating novel that interweaves the psychological evolution of a young lady with overarching societal and existential concerns. The title of the novel, *The Bell Jar*, depicts the subtle yet suffocating block that separates Esther from the world, impairing her capacity to breathe or fully participate in life. It encapsulates the sensation of restriction that often characterizes her narcissism. Esther's escalating detachment from reality and her inability to interact with others are vividly illustrated in her narrative. The protagonist of the story, Esther Greenwood, undergoes a mental breakdown that facilitates the exploration of themes such as identity, suppression, and self-worth. Narcissism emerges as a prominent issue in the story, characterized not by overt arrogance but by a pathological self-absorption stemming from insecurity and societal pressure, therefore termed "Narcissism."



“So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you’re curing. They’re dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together” (Plath, 1963, p. 55)

In this excerpt, Esther displays narcissism; however, unlike traditional narcissism characterized by grandiosity and an inflated self-image, the narcissism referenced here signifies a gendered variant. It is a psychological mechanism developed in response to societal constraints and identity conflicts. Esther's circumstances reveal narcissism as a dissonant self-image shaped by the ideals of 1950s American womanhood and personal ambitions. While resting on her bed, she envisioned conversing with Buddy (her lover) and responded to herself. The cadavers you dissect are indeed. Thus, the individuals you believe you are healing. They are as insubstantial as dust. She believes a single excellent poetry endures far longer than a hundred individuals together.

I thought the TB might just be a punishment for living the kind of double life Buddy lived and feeling so superior to people. And I thought how convenient it would be now I didn’t have to announce to everybody at college I had broken off with Buddy and start the boring business of blind dates all over again (Plath, 1963, p.69) .

This extract provides further evidence of narcissism in Esther's character upon learning of Buddy's illness. She expressed her regret to Buddy regarding the tuberculosis and vowed to write, although upon concluding the call, she felt no genuine regret. She experienced a profound sense of relief. She believed that the tuberculosis could only be a consequence of leading the double existence that Buddy maintained and harboring a sense of superiority over others. Furthermore, she fabricated an excuse to inform everyone at campus that she had ended her relationship



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with Buddy and commenced the tedious process of blind dating anew. She uses this technique to protect herself from the society.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out (Plath, 1963 p.73).

This excerpt offers additional evidence of narcissism in Esther's character. Esther contends with numerous identities, likening herself to a fig tree with various branches. One fig symbolized a husband with a contented household and progeny, akin to the compliant female archetype society expects her to portray; another fig epitomized a celebrated poet; yet another fig personified a distinguished professor; while another fig represented Ee Gee, the illustrious editor. Furthermore, one fig represented Europe, Africa, and South America, while another fig denoted historical characters such as Constantine, Socrates, and Attila, alongside a group of persons with atypical names and uncommon professions. Moreover, one figure illustrated an Olympic female crew champion, while many other figures remained ambiguous. This tension leads to a disjointed self-concept. Her inability to assimilate these identities fosters a narcissistic fixation, causing her to obsessively ruminate on her perceived flaws and inadequacies. At the terminus of each branch, akin to a succulent purple fig, a captivating future enticed and shimmered.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs



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began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet ( Plath,1963, p.74).

In this extract, Esther exists in agony, perceiving herself on the verge of death, only owing to her indecision about which life to choose. She yearned for every unique possibility; but, choosing one required relinquishing the others. She experiences a sense of indecision; all the options began to decay and darken, ultimately descending to the earth at her feet, one by one. Plath often utilized mirror images to elucidate Esther's inner conflict. Mirrors function as instruments for self-examination, frequently eliciting unease or estrangement. Esther barely recognizes her reflection, representing her fragmented identity and compulsive self-examination, a fundamental characteristic of Narcissism.

And then I wondered if as soon as he came to like me he would sink into ordinariness, and if as soon as he came to love me I would find fault after fault, the way I did with Buddy Willard and the boys before him. The same thing happened over and over...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 from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket (Plath,1963, p.78).

This excerpt reveals Esther's incapacity to lead a conventional life as a lady and to engage with a guy and cohabit with him. The pressures Esther encounters from a patriarchal society exacerbate her narcissistic inclinations. She assimilates social standards of femininity and achievement, resulting in perpetual self-scrutiny. This internalization transforms her into both the observer and the observed, perpetuating a cycle of self-criticism and discontent. Upon meeting him, she contemplated whether, once he developed affection for her, he would descend into mediocrity, and if, upon falling in love, and she would begin to criticize him incessantly, as she had with Buddy Willard and other men. The identical occurrence transpired repeatedly. That is one of the reasons she was averse to



marriage. She desired to attain boundless security and to serve as the origin from which an arrow is launched. She uses her characteristic of narcissism as a defense by desiring transformation and exhilaration, yearning to propel herself in multiple directions, akin to the vibrant arrows emitted by a Fourth of July rocket.

I knew I should be grateful to Mrs Guinea, only I couldn't feel a thing. If Mrs Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street cafe in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air (Plath, 1963, p.166).

An additional notable aspect of narcissism in this work is the lack of constructive female mentorship. Despite Esther's interactions with other women, few offer genuine support or understanding. The contentious and critical character of such interactions intensifies her isolation and denies her the support that could mitigate her self-doubt. The media and cultural standards depicted in fashion magazines and mainstream media act as narcissistic mirrors. Media has a role to disseminate a gendered kind of narcissism by presenting unrealistic ideals as normative. Throughout Esther's internship in New York, she perceives remarkable depictions of women who appear effortlessly wealthy and captivating. Esther's limited interactions with women restrict her to introspection, denying her the external validation essential for a positive evolution of her self-perception. Esther's narcissism intensifies as she strives for perfection and seeks to be the most intelligent individual in the school. Esther's narcissistic traits are intensifying following her father's death, resulting in emotional instability. She exists in a state of narcissism due to her melancholy, which exacerbates her fractured identity, as she desires authority persons while simultaneously resenting their dominion over her. She seeks self-approval. Her psychological discomfort is attributable not only to cultural gender conventions but also to unresolved parental trauma. Esther recognizes her inability to manage issues of this magnitude. She has internal struggle while collaborating with numerous accomplished individuals. She



consistently juxtaposes her work with theirs, which instills a need for perfection. This fixation on perfection is detrimental, as Esther's fear of failure evolves into profound self-loathing. Her failure to achieve her unrealistic standards exacerbates her mental deterioration and illustrates the detrimental effects of a narcissistic self-image and excessively lofty objectives.

I hadn't washed my hair for three weeks, either. I hadn't slept for seven nights. My mother told me I must have slept, it was impossible not to sleep in all that time, but if I slept, it was with my eyes wide open, for I had followed the green, luminous course of the second hand and the minute hand and the hour hand of the bedside clock through their circles and semi-circles, every night for seven nights, without missing a second, or a minute, or an hour. The reason I hadn't washed my clothes or my hair was because it seemed so silly (Plath, 1963, p.116)

This excerpt reveals further evidence of Esther's psychological disorder. She had not cleansed her hair for three weeks, either. She had not slept for seven consecutive nights. Despite her mother's assertion that she must have slept, it was inconceivable to remain awake for such an extended period, yet she is unable to do so. Indeed, even when she slumbered, her eyes remained wide awake. She resided in a state of struggle, having meticulously tracked the verdant, radiant trajectory of the second, minute, and hour hands of the bedside clock through their whole cycles for seven consecutive nights, without failing to observe a single second, minute, or hour. She refrained from washing her clothes or her hair since it appeared trivial.

“A few more shock treatments, Mrs Greenwood,” I heard Doctor Gordon say, “and I think you'll notice a wonderful improvement” (Plath, 1963, p.131) Esther's path to rehabilitation is incremental and ambiguous. Her hospitalization signifies a transitional phase in which she addresses her narcissistic tendencies. Therapy and medicine provide a reflection that enables her to reassemble a more cohesive identity, yet the bell jar continues to pose a persistent threat. The Bell Jar was



profoundly shaped by Plath's own experiences. Her battle with melancholy and societal pressures parallels Esther's experience, rendering the tale both autobiographical and psychologically profound. Through Esther, Plath analyzes the societal conditions that breed psychiatric diseases such as Narcissism in women.

I had a suspicion that my mother had called Jody and begged her to ask me out, so I wouldn't sit around in my room all day with the shades drawn. I didn't want to go at first, because I thought Jody would notice the change in me, and that anybody with half an eye would see I didn't have a brain in my head"(Plath,1963, p.139)

Throughout Esther's recovery path, she faces her narcissistic traits. Therapy and medicine provide a reflection that enables her to reconstruct a more cohesive identity, while in the bell jar; she remains isolated in her room all day with the shades drawn. Her mother endeavors to facilitate her swift recovery; Esther harbored a fear that her mother had contacted Jody and implored her to invite me out, so preventing her from doing so. She was first unwilling to attend, as she believed Jody would perceive the alteration in her manner, and that anyone with even minimal observation would recognize her lack of intellect.

That morning I had tried to hang myself. I had taken the silk cord of my mother's yellow bathrobe as soon as she left for work, and, in the amber shade of the bedroom, fashioned it into a knot that slipped up and down on itself. It took me a long time to do this, because I was poor at knots and had no idea how to make a proper one (Plath, 1963, p.141)

This excerpt illustrates Esther's gradual loss of self-control. Her mental illness has intensified, prompting her that morning to commit suicide by hanging. Esther's suicidal ideation is a manifestation of her internalized self-hatred. The desire to disappear stems from an inability to escape the distorted self-image shaped by societal standards. Suicide becomes the ultimate act of narcissism not in selfishness, but in a total collapse of self-worth and perspective. She appropriated the silk string from her mother's yellow bathrobe immediately upon her departure for work and, in the amber hue of the bedroom, crafted it into a knot that could



slide onto it. Indeed, it required her much time to accomplish this, as she lacked proficiency in tying knots and possessed no knowledge of how to create an adequate one.

Plath uses different literary techniques such as broken narrative, bleak imagery, and variable tone as tools that allow readers to immediately observe Esther's narcissistic deterioration. She utilizes artistic components to illustrate Esther's psychological breakdowns. In fact, her narrative style reflects her uniqueness in depicting the mental illness of her main character; at the same time she uses the graphic and vulgar metaphors to depict the distorted inner world. Plath's proficiency in articulating the psychological depth enhances the novel's effectiveness as a psychological analysis.

Though, through her character Esther, she depicts how Esther imagines that others' expectations of her experiences diverge from her actual encounters. This disparity exacerbates her narcissism. Plath illustrates considers the society is behind the mental disease of Esther especially when it anticipates that women such as Esther exhibit happiness, adaptability, and self-assurance, compelling her to conceal her inherent melancholy, scepticism, and morbid humour. She recognizes that the fashion industry in New York City ought to evoke feelings of glamour and joy; however, she perceives it as rife with substance abuse, drunkenness, and violence. She desires her relationships with men to be romantic and significant; however, they are characterised by confusion, distrust, and violence. Plath believes she is unable to discuss or contemplate the distressing aspects of her life that trouble her: her own shortcomings, sorrow, and mortality. Esther consistently perceives her acts as erroneous and believes that no one shares her perspective, leading her to feel as though she is not authentic. This sensation intensifies progressively until it becomes intolerable, potentially resulting in suicide attempts and madness.



## 5. Conclusion

The study examines the inquiry: “In what manner is narcissism as a defense mechanism depicted in the character of Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*?” The researcher employs Otto Kernberg’s theory of narcissism (1993) in conjunction with Judith Herman’s trauma framework (1992) to analyze Esther’s psychological representation. The research employs an in-depth textual analysis to elucidate Esther's internal disintegration and identity dissolution, demonstrating her utilization of narcissism as a psychological defense mechanism against internal conflicts and external pressures. The study illustrates Esther's psychological deterioration, typified by the cultural constraints imposed on women, while her internal struggles reflect Kernberg's concept of a sensitive narcissistic personality structure. She lives in a state of struggle and self-doubt, oscillating between feelings of superiority and inferiority, and possesses a fragile sense of self with minimal cohesiveness. She lives in a conflict of being severely miscomprehended by her all the people around her which forced her to use narcissism as a defence mechanism. Moreover, Esther's inability to reconcile idealized and undervalued facets of herself and others underscores a lack in establishing a cohesive identity. Her narcissistic traits serve as a defensive strategy, protecting her fragile self from the stress of societal expectations, psychological insecurities, and relationship pressures. The study indicates that Esther's narcissism is not only a harmful trait; rather, it functions as a defense mechanism that allows her to cope with substantial emotional turmoil, depressive symptoms, and identity fragmentation. The use of Kernberg's notion of narcissism, in conjunction with Herman's 1992 analysis, elucidates how Esther's defensive narcissistic structure protects her from psychological fragmentation while concurrently exacerbating her internal struggle.

### Recommendation of the study:

1. Investigating feminism ideas through using female characters who are experiencing identity crises and oppressive feelings within patriarchal society
2. Analyzing the motherhood ideas through depicting the suffering of Esther’s mother who is trying to help her daughter get rid of the emotions such as such as depression or borderline personality traits.



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