

Reading *The Bell Jar* as Autobiography

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Many, in their reading of *The Bell Jar*, have tried to separate the art from its author and see the book as a work of fiction; detached from Plath's life. People may read the novel as fiction for a variety of reasons. Perhaps to form an opinion of the novel untouched by knowledge of Plath's life. Alternatively, as a refusal to accept that Esther's state of mind could be real. However, something is lost by ignoring Plath. The subject matter is so tightly interwoven with her own personal struggles that reading *The Bell Jar* as a strongly autobiographical work becomes unavoidable. Writing from the perspective of a fictional character with a mental illness simply cannot be done adequately without the author having experienced said illness. Whilst the events and characters depicted in *The Bell Jar* may not be entirely true to life, Plath is speaking through Esther's thoughts. The book is an account of her mind.

Reading *The Bell Jar* autobiographically can provide us with great insight into Plath's life, state of mind and her eventual suicide. Schwartz and Murray propose that "To understand her suicide, we need to understand her work and her life as a unity." (148). It is not unreasonable to assume that Esther is a surrogate for the author. Esther's suicide attempt mirrors Plath's own. Both take sleeping pills and crawl to the basement of their house. "I knew just how to go about it." (Plath, 168). Esther knows exactly what to do because Plath has already lived it. Her own husband, Ted Hughes, reinforces this idea, writing that the novel "dramatizes the decisive event of her adult life, which was her attempted suicide and accidental survival ... Taken separately, each episode of the plot is a close-to-documentary account of something that did happen in the author's life." (13).

Admittedly, reading Esther's suicide attempt as autobiographical is difficult, but doing so grants us a rare perspective and understanding of mental health. We are not reading how someone thinks a character with depression would act; we are reading an account of Plath's own mental state. Wagner-Martin points out these parallels between the novel and her life, stating that "The depression that was endemic in her father's family troubled her during her junior year ... she was given bi-polar electroconvulsive shock treatments." (2).

Reading the novel as autobiographical is not sensationalist; it is tragic and real. Readers are faced with accepting the harsh reality of mental illness and how it was handled in the 1950s. To write moments such as Esther's suicide attempt off as fictional is a comfortable reality that completely dismisses her suffering. However, the autobiographical nature of *The Bell Jar* is not entirely limited to her mind's journey; the events of the novel are also grounded in reality more than first meets the eye.

Some say that the novel is autobiographical in the sense that it documents Plath's mental state but then go on to argue that the events that surround Esther are fictional. This ignores the fact that broad strokes of the novel perfectly mirror Plath's own life. Wagner-Martin recounts Plath's "selection for the College Board of Mademoiselle magazine in 1953." (2). Mademoiselle was a women's magazine based in New York City at which Plath spent a summer working as a guest editor. She chronicles her time there through Esther, writing that "a girl ... wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself." (16). Plath herself had won \$500 from the magazine for a short story in 1952. It is here that she first begins to describe her struggles as a woman in the 1950s; feeling as if her life is being controlled. She is expected to idolise and adore the glamorous city but does not fit in and finds it challenging to live according to the expectations people have for her. Reading her experiences here as autobiographical paints a depressing picture of life for a woman in her time. It is difficult to know how much of her tales from the magazine are exaggerated but the general ideas and feelings remain founded in truth.

Joanne Greenberg speaks of an interview she once conducted with a woman who claimed to have worked with Plath at Mademoiselle, "And then she wrote the Bell Jar and told on all of us ... And she told about the abortion that so-and-so had and the affair that so-and-so had. We could never look at each other again because these were secrets we had had. And, in some cases, it broke up my marriage and it broke up somebody else's." (0:12:17 – 0:12:42). From this interview, we learn that Plath's novel is constructed from real events more than initially thought. Reading with this knowledge serves to heighten our immersion and furthers our belief in the characters. It also emphasises the unforgiving political landscape of the time and the impact it had on Plath.

The political consequences of reading *The Bell Jar* as an autobiographical work pertain to how Esther is limited by the cultural role of women in the 1950s. It can be ascertained that the limitations she faces are based on Plath's own experiences. She writes that Esther "felt like a racehorse in a world without racetracks." (84). She doesn't fit into this patriarchal society and is having great trouble finding her place in the world. Describing her doubts about having children, Plath writes Esther saying "How easy having babies seemed to the women around me! Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat puling baby like Dodo Conway?" (218). Esther does not see herself as maternal and believes her "self" to be separate from the world around her. She doesn't want to have children and scoffs at the idea. The novel describes her attempts to escape from this stereotype. Budick proposes that "Esther looks to Jay Cee as a source of a female language through which she can enter into meaningful discourse with the world ... But Jay Cee is only another version of female submission. She is the masculine in female disguise." (876). In her search for self, Esther turns to Jay Cee but again becomes

even more fragmented. Jay Cee is another symbol of the male-dominated world that Esther wishes to escape from.

As we know, Plath eventually succumbed to her cultural role, marrying Ted Hughes and giving birth to two children. Reading the novel autobiographically gives us an insight into how she might have once resisted these societal expectations. Bonds notes that “Esther is haunted by images suggesting the self-mutilations of marriage and motherhood. She recalls the way in which Buddy Willard’s mother weaves a beautiful rug only to destroy its beauty in a matter of days by using it as a kitchen mat.” (4). Reading this passage autobiographically gives way to a highly dark metaphor. Plath once wrote to her therapist that Hughes beat her two days before her miscarriage. The beautiful rug could be read as a metaphor for Plath’s child, who she sees as taken from her by her husband. Esther’s rejection of motherhood can be interpreted as Plath’s rebellion against her own unhappy marriage. Seeing this patriarchal society and her marriage as inescapable, Plath writes “on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.” (185). The bell jar is not only a metaphor for her mental health but also the system in which she lives, and the standards set for her that she is ultimately subservient to. It follows her everywhere; a constant reminder of her place as a woman in the 1950s. In the end, as a result of her desire to escape this bell jar, Plath took her own life; this aspect being the focus of many critics’ autobiographical readings.

There is a danger in reading *The Bell Jar* with the assumption that “her suicide authenticates the truth of her writings”. The implication here is that Plath killing herself “proves” her depression was real and that the novel has more value as a result. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, Esther speaks about her suicidal ideation as if she is detached from her body, “The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.” (103). These thoughts are real and have merit. She does not need to act to “authenticate” how she feels. This detachment is shown further when she hesitates to self-harm. Plath writes, “The skin of my wrist looked so white and so defenceless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb.” (149). Esther has become so disconnected from herself that she does not immediately harm her body; her mind has become completely isolated. Plath’s mental illness was a part of her life long before *The Bell Jar* or her suicide. It also continued in the family with her own son, Nicholas Hughes, hanging himself in 2009.

Had Plath gone on to live a happy life, would the novel have gone on to receive the critical acclaim and attention that it did? The morbid answer to that question is no. This speaks to a wider issue with how society as a whole handles mental health. People suffering from a mental illness are oftentimes ignored until they do something that makes it real; at which point it is altogether too late. Regrettably, the focus of the novel’s place in culture is often

Plath's suicide. It is worth noting that Plath did not want *The Bell Jar* to be immediately associated with her and may not have intended for it to be read autobiographically. She published the novel under a different name, both to protect the people she had written about and to separate it from herself in the eyes of the public. Badet states "As Taubman's review in the *New Statesman* makes clear, the novel's identity in 1963 is that of a first novel by a literary newcomer, rather than the work of a literary icon known widely and equally for both her poetry and her suicide." (127). It is important to not only focus on Plath's suicide when discussing the novel. Her life authenticates the truth of her writings, not her death. *The Bell Jar* would be no less autobiographical had Plath died of natural causes.

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