

Female Entrapment In Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar

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Abstract:

Plath's grievance is thus the utterly subordinated nature of women to men when it comes to marriage and the need for women to be little more than appendages and sexual and domestic slaves to men as Dodo Conway and Doreen demonstrate. At the heart of it is Plath's rebellion against the subordinated status of women to men in society, they are expected to be sexually passive and to serve the men whom their lives revolve around completely, only to be repaid with the men they serve having affairs and drinking. While the Biblical God did indeed make Eve as companion to man and to be his helper, what Plath seems to imply in the novel is that this being made as an appendage to man is a complete suffocation of women's rights, independence and freedom, and the bell jar of depression and suicide is the only way to escape this prison and to experience liberty and freedom.

Keywords: *Plath, Feminism, Depression, Suicide, Subordination*

In Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar, the female condition is depicted as one which is highly oppressive and

subordinated to men, leading Plath to descend into clinical depression and subsequently a suicide attempt. At the heart of the conflict is Plath's perceived injustice at the double standards at work for men which do not apply to women, such as Buddy Willard's ability to complacently engage in extramarital sex while Plath is required to remain pure for marriage, and the oppressive cage of marriage as a trap and imprisonment for Plath, who apart from the need to get married, has seen a life of academic achievement, only to be reduced to the need for becoming a domestic slave and child-bearer once she gets encumbered with the need for marriage.

One might say the novel is about Plath's regret that she is not a man with a phallus, because that condition might actually enable her to lead a life of authenticity and freedom. Being female comes with the expectations of eventually becoming a domestic keeper no matter what one has achieved prior to getting married, as Plath mentions when she says men like Buddy Willard intend to serenade her with high romance only to iron her out flat like a mat like Buddy Willard's mother after marriage, reduced to a life of menial household chores and work

that revolves entirely around the family while Buddy Willard lives a double life of male hypocrisy and is able by virtue of his status as a male to engage in casual sex with a waitress.

Plath is also repulsed by the idea of sex, as she finds that it is an act of violence towards women and not in the least attractive as a prospect. Upon Buddy Willard exposing his male genitals to her, Plath confesses that all she can think about is turkey neck and gizzards, the male organ does not stimulate her sexually and when she first has a sexual encounter in order to get revenge on Buddy Willard for his casual attitude towards sex with an older professor she bleeds incessantly, demonstrating that the sexual act has more gratification for males than females and leads to more suffering on the part of females than males, essentially an act of violence towards females as Plath comes close to being raped by a woman-hater Marco in one section of the book.

Plath is repulsed also by the need for women to be incessant child bearers and household keepers, as she is repulsed by the figure of Dodo Conway, who has a large family of six children and seems to be completely immune to the burden and entrapment that being a mother and household keeper brings, she seems completely to fit the mould of being a child-bearer and child-rearer complacently and it is such women that Plath or her alter-ego Esther resents completely because it seems to be an entrapment for women, while men can pursue affairs and

careers and money and glamour women are reduced to being appendages to men in having to be enslaved to bringing up the children that they bear for them.

Plath thus feels that being female is little more than being an appendage to men as they are allowed sexual liberties that are forbidden to women and allowed to pursue money glamour and fame all at the expense of their wives who have to make sacrifices and raise children for them. The idea of marriage appals Plath who finds it little more than an entrapment and imprisonment for someone as talented and full of promise independently as herself. Plath is also repulsed by the idea of females being completely passive, indebted and at the mercy of male desire as Doreen demonstrates at the presence of Lenny Sheppard, independently Doreen had been sharp-witted and satirical of people around her but around Lenny Sheppard Doreen transforms into a completely passive sex object for him, to be played around with at his will and mercy, the sight of them making out is so abhorrent to Esther or Plath that she has to leave the apartment altogether.

As a consequence of all the expectations of her as a female to throw away and abandon her life of high achievement and personal accolades when she becomes married and enslaved to a man like Buddy Willard who has no intuition or sense of decency towards women as he crudely and insensitively engages in casual sex with a waitress with no heed

of Esther's feelings as she is expected to remain pure and sexually untainted for him, Esther descends into a deep clinical depression that can be cured only by electroconvulsion, the ultimate violence towards her as she feels part of her is being executed like the Rosenbergs she mentions at the beginning of the novel, to be female it seems is a crime liable to being punished for one's simple status as a woman and the discomfort it causes in her when she does not complacently fit into the mould of Dodo Conway and Doreen who do not mind at all being completely at the mercy of men and indebted to them as well as being little more than domestic or sexual slaves to men as Dodo Conway ungrudgingly has one child after another and sees no need to distinguish herself with a career and as Doreen who had been so satirical and sharp is reduced to a completely compliant sexual object at the hands of Lenny Sheppard. Eventually, Esther makes a suicide attempt, albeit unsuccessful, as she feels she cannot escape the bell jar or suffocating imprisonment that the status of simply being female imposes upon her. This bell jar however was to descend on Plath eventually when as a mother of two married to an unfaithful Ted Hughes she eventually successfully takes her life by putting her head in a gas stove oven. At the heart of Plath's grievance is the fact that women seem to be completely subordinated and at the mercy of male desire and the need for women to sacrifice their careers and reputation to simply become domestic keepers, it seems that all the academic accomplishment Plath has achieved will become utterly meaningless after she marries Buddy Willard because she

will be flattened out like a rug under his feet like Buddy's mother. Plath is also alienated from her mother, who fails to understand her completely and tries to make her feel guilt for her depression by repeatedly asking Plath how she had failed as a mother and what she had done wrong to cause her to go into depression when it is largely convention and society which has victimized Plath by confining her to the bell jar of marriage and motherhood in place of the alternative futures she had envisioned for herself with a successful career as a professor or editor. It is society's rigid expectations of her path as a mother and wife that causes her to descend into depression. Plath also rejects the lesbian alternative, she rejects Joan's advances and does not see Joan as an alternative to male subordination as she is repulsed by the idea of being lesbian for it seems unnatural and disgusting to her.

Plath's grievance is thus the utterly subordinated nature of women to men when it comes to marriage and the need for women to be little more than appendages and sexual and domestic slaves to men as Dodo Conway and Doreen demonstrate. At the heart of it is Plath's rebellion against the subordinated status of women to men in society, they are expected to be sexually passive and to serve the men whom their lives revolve around completely, only to be repaid with the men they serve having affairs and drinking. While the Biblical God did indeed make Eve as companion to man and to be his helper, what Plath seems to imply in the novel

is that this being made as an appendage to man is a complete suffocation of women's rights, independence and freedom, and the bell jar of depression and suicide is the only way to escape this prison and to experience liberty and freedom.

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