

A Woman Born Twice: Esther Greenwood's Reconstruction of the Female Identity in a Pervasively Patriarchal 1950's America

By Taylor Steinbeck

ABSTRACT. Esther Greenwood of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is an educated, creative, young woman uninterested in marriage or motherhood, despite living in 1950's America—a time in which the patriarchal values dictated that womanhood was tied to the roles of wife and mother. Forger of second-wave feminism through her text, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan urged the despondent housewives of the '50s to become a woman similar to Esther: to pursue academia, take on creative hobbies, and clinch a career. Though the lifestyles of the suburban housewives and Esther appear radically different, Esther suffers from a depression that mirrors the symptoms of the illness Friedan diagnoses as “the problem that has no name.” This paper examines these particular depressions Esther and the housewives experience as a derivation from their entrapment in a patriarchally-dominated space where their agencies are revoked.

It is no coincidence that two novels such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* were each published only a month apart from one other in the year of 1963; both texts were a product of their tempestuous age. As Friedan outlines in her bestseller—which spearheaded the second wave of feminism—the 1950's proved to be a confusing, distressing decade for woman, housewives in particular. She began *Mystique* by referring to this sweeping unhappiness felt by women of her and Plath's time,

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States” (Friedan, 1997, p. 15).

Friedan attributed this dissatisfaction among women, or what she called “the problem that has no name,” to housewives wanting something more in their lives than just “[her] husband and [her] children and [her] home” (Friedan, 1997, p. 32). Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar*, however, is no housewife of the ‘50s. She is a Smith College-educated, internship-earning, poetry-writing go-getter interested in neither marriage nor motherhood, and yet she still experiences an emptiness uncannily similar to that of Friedan’s housewives. This being said, I contend that Esther’s depression stems not only from the anxiety of having to choose who she wants to be—as she expands upon through the metaphor of the fig tree—but mostly from having to construct her *own* concept of womanhood when the forces of patriarchy are so palpably working to convince her that a woman’s identity is tied to being man’s other, namely, “the feminine mystique.”

Esther *appears* to be living an empowered life antithetical to the dreary existence Friedan ascribes to the housewives in her text; in fact, Esther could be a prime example of who Friedan wants the housewives to become, and yet she suffers symptoms almost identical to those afflicted by “the feminine mystique.” To break away from the trap of “the feminine mystique,” Friedan encouraged women to piece together a life plan that included education and art-related hobbies. Esther is both highly educated and interested in the arts, and if it were not the case that she predated Friedan’s work, it would seem as though Esther followed her advice. On paper, Esther comes across as the “New Woman” Friedan advocated for: a woman who has successfully silenced “the voices of the feminine mystique” (Friedan, 1997, p. 378), but in reality, Esther is just as lost as the suburban housewives.

The symptoms of falling prey to the “feminine mystique” are alarmingly similar to the ways in which Esther’s depression manifests itself. Friedan diagnosed the “feminine mystique” as a disease that deludes women into believing that their only commitment is the “fulfillment of their own femininity,” and this femininity is achieved in “sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love” (Friedan, 1997, p. 43). After conducting interviews with many different women, including those who were colleagues of hers at Smith College (another eerie parallel), Friedan detected several similarities in the troubled feelings of these women. She observed, “Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say ‘I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete’” (Friedan, 1997, p. 20). Despite her supposedly non-feminine ambitions and implied rejection of the “feminine mystique,” Esther’s emotions echo the unhappiness of the interviewees. Esther feels a sense of guilt for not enjoying her internship in New York, even though such a position at an esteemed magazine would make her “the envy of thousands of other college girls just like [her] all over America” (Plath, 2013, p. 2). She says of her lack of enthusiasm for the opportunity, “I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty” (p. 3). How could the archetypal housewife of Friedan’s *Mystique*, whose selfhood is defined by her roles as wife and mother, and Plath’s Esther Greenwood, who is ambitious and ahead of her time, *both* feel an identical sort of emptiness when they each lead such polar lifestyles? The answer is that these women are not so different. Esther, the prospective career woman, and Friedan’s housewife both exist in realms dominated by the male influence: the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the workplace. Thus their identities are muddled by what the patriarchy wants them to be.

Esther undeniably associates the need to make choices for her future with anxiety. As evidenced by the fig tree metaphor, she realizes that there are several different paths she could take. She sees one fig as having a husband and children; she sees another as her being a professor and another of her traveling the world and another of her being an editor like her boss, Jay Cee. Despite all these choices, she feels as though she has been rendered immobile. This sentiment is mimicked almost identically by psychologist Rollo May's description of anxiety. May (1958) commented that anxiety "occurs at the point where some emerging potentiality or possibility faces the individual, some possibility of fulfilling his existence; but this very possibility involved destroying of present security, which thereupon gives rise to the tendency to deny the new potentiality" (p. 53). It is not merely the fact that Esther has to decide between her potentialities as a person, but the reality that she is an emerging woman of the early 1950's adds an entirely new layer to her existential issues. Scholar Nóra Séllei (2003) claimed that "it is the pressure of choice—and most particularly, as clear from the enumeration, the choice between being a wife and mother and being a female creator—that leads to the protagonist Esther Greenwood's schizophrenia and psychic collapse" (p. 128). I am convinced that there is something deeper at work than just the pressure to become a mother for Esther. It is the pressure to be solely responsible for developing an entirely *new* womanhood which exists outside of the patriarchy's authority, when she has virtually no role models to turn to, that actually causes her mental anguish.

Though it is never explicitly stated, Esther seems to have an awareness of and a very real disdain for the patriarchy. She acknowledges the ways in which the patriarchy works to subjugate women in marriage and motherhood when she mentions that the drug given during birth to make the mother forget the pain so she will have more babies is "just like the sort of drug a man would invent" (Plath, 2013, p. 66). Later, after her boyfriend

Buddy Willard claims she will no longer be interested in poetry after she gives birth, she imagines that being married and having children must be like “being brainwashed and . . . numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (p. 85). Esther does not realize, however, that the patriarchy’s power extends beyond the domestic sphere. When describing what sort of job she would want, Esther unashamedly says, “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way” (p. 76), and what a trouble this is indeed; what Esther fails to see is that in working for a woman’s magazine like *Mademoiselle*, she is, in a way, serving man. Though *Mademoiselle* is run by Jay Cee, a woman, the images put forth by the magazine, are most certainly images of “the feminine mystique,” manufactured by the patriarchy to show women what they should strive to be. Said Friedan of the world of women’s magazines, “In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep the man” (Friedan, 1997, p. 36). It is no wonder that Esther struggles to create the ideal picture of the woman she wants to be when she is being bombarded by images contesting that very image, while also being under the guise that she is in an empowering career. Nicholas Donofrio (2015) concurred in his academic work, “Esther Greenwood’s Internship: White Collar Work and Literary Careerism in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*,” that “indeed, *The Bell Jar* seems to suggest that for young women with career ambitions, working on these magazines might be just as harmful—which is to say, just as counterproductive—as reading them” (p. 220-221). The isolation Esther feels while at her internship could be attributed to the fact that the women she is surrounded by are convinced by the world of women’s magazines, and though she knows that “something was wrong with [her] that summer” (Plath, 2013, p. 2), her inability to figure out exactly what that “something” is could be because that “something” is an aversion to the mysterious, dangerous ways the patriarchy controls even seemingly woman-lead establishments.

The journal article “Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: a Mirror of American Fifties,” recognizes that although it was the logic of the time to equate womanhood with motherhood, Esther rejects this thinking and “frowns at this biological essentialism which construes woman as an object of desire and a vehicle for procreation” (Ghandeharion, Bozorgian, & Sabbagh, 2016). Despite the fact that Esther *says* she is against adhering to the traditional female roles required of her, she still feels susceptible to succumbing to the patriarchy's molding of her into a wife and mother. The societal expectation to give birth looms over her constantly. Interestingly enough, Esther describes the pressure of motherhood similarly to how she describes the effect of the bell jar. When Esther's depression manifests itself, it feels as though a bell jar is descending down upon her. After leaving Belsize she still has the lingering fear that her depression will return, which she reveals when she wonders, “How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?” (Plath, 2013, p. 241). This looming feeling is also present when it comes to the mental and emotional strain of conforming to societal standards. Esther stresses, “A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head . . . to keep me in line” (p. 222). The bell jar Esther's mind has conjured up is not a mere metaphor for her depression; it is a symbol of the patriarchy trying to pollute her brain with its time-honored values. Whether or not Esther actually gives into the voices of the “feminine mystique” in the form of the bell jar is debatable, but I hold that she does not. She overcomes them.

It is unclear whether, in Esther's future, she ever does marry; it is only at the novel's end that, at the time of her recovery, she had maintained that she “wasn't getting married” (Plath, 2013, p. 244). Yet when she is reminiscing about her internship experience at the novel's beginning she implies that she has since become a mother. How could

Esther transform so drastically from once asserting that, “children made me sick” (p. 117) to later embracing the idea of motherhood? I am convinced it is because she learns that although being a mother is a necessity for a woman wanting to “fulfill her femininity,” Esther herself, does not have to subscribe to the patriarchal notion of the “feminine mystique” to be a mother. Just as Esther is seeking to build her own identity as a woman, she also has the ability to become her own kind of mother. The reason why it takes her so long to realize this is because until Doctor Nolan, Esther’s psychiatrist and “feminist hero,” Esther had not become acquainted with an embodiment of womanhood she could relate to.

It is Doctor Nolan who finally shows Esther that she can be her own kind of woman. There is a tangible shift in Esther’s mentality when Doctor Nolan informs her that having sex does not have to lead to motherhood, and she prescribes her birth control. Before that moment, Esther had very much subscribed to the myth of female purity that her mother and the patriarchy instilled in her. Her mother misleads her by claiming that there is, “no one hundred percent sure way not to have a baby” (Plath, 2013, p. 81) when a woman has sex and she indoctrinates her daughter with an article entitled, “In Defense of Chastity.” Esther acknowledges the double-standard of men being able to have sex without consequence, but women having to sacrifice their bodies to motherhood when she says, “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not” (p. 81). Despite registering this inequity, she still strives to preserve her purity because she mistakenly believes it determines her value. It is Doctor Nolan that provides Esther the tools to liberate herself from the patriarchy’s harmful influence, while also helping her to manage her depression. Christopher Simons (2011) argues that,

[The] key is sexual freedom through contraception, and an overthrow of the sexual double standard in 1950s America. Sexual inequality and a lack of appropriate channels for female sexuality play a role in Esther's mental breakdown" (p. 32).

When Doctor Nolan supplies Esther with the revelation that the "Defense of Chastity" is mere "propaganda" (Plath, 2013, p. 222), a propaganda of the patriarchy used to suppress women, she is disillusioned of society's spell on her. As she is having her diaphragm fitted, she thinks, "I am climbing to freedom" (p. 223) to indicate that with the administering of birth control, the bell jar has temporarily lifted, allowing her to clearly see who she wants to be. Through birth control, Esther gains control of her own agency; she does not have to submit to men or the patriarchy's ideas about the sexual realm, or any other realm in her reality for that matter. In claiming her sexual freedom, Esther learns how to operate outside of the bounds of the patriarchy; in her freedom she is able to proudly declare, "I [am] my own woman" (p. 223).

It is important to note that depression is a complex illness and what Esther and the housewives experience is not simply a product of the patriarchy; to claim that depression is manifested merely by outside factors neglects the fact that depression is also a very real biological disorder. However, depression takes on multiple forms and it *can* be triggered by life events (such as the trauma of the death of a loved one). This is the case for Esther and the housewives, and the fact that the housewives and Esther only began to feel the symptoms of depression after being entrapped in patriarchally-dominated spaces certainly seems to suggest that their oppression played a role in their mental illnesses. It cannot emphasize enough that the sex itself is not what "cures" Esther of her depression, and to say she was so easily "cured" would be minimizing depression's complicated and elusive effect. Doctor Nolan essentially introduces feminism to Esther, and it is feminism that grants her the tools to think beyond the

patriarchal ideals that she was being fed before and thus can manage a particular type of depression that was aggravated by the gender inequities of her time. Understanding and recognizing the roots of one's mental anguish is just one way important way of practicing self-care. Having sex did not lift the bell jar for Esther; it was her realizing her agency and her ability to define her own womanhood.

In the novel's final page, Esther admits to feeling as though she has been "born twice" (Plath, 2013, p. 244), which could be attributed to the fact that dispelling the patriarchy's influence has now opened her eyes to an entirely new world. She learns through Doctor Nolan that she actually *can* choose multiple figs. She can be a wife without having to be subservient to her husband. She can be a mother without having to slave after her child. She can be a career woman and have a life outside of her job. She can be whatever kind of woman she wants to be because her identity is hers to choose. Friedan concludes *The Feminine Mystique* with a battle cry for her fellow females: "The time is at hand when the voice of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete" (Friedan, 1997, p. 378). At the beginning of Esther's journey to selfhood she defeatedly professes, "I wasn't steering anything, not even myself" (Plath, 2013, p. 2). After conquering the "feminine mystique" she has undoubtedly driven herself to a sense of fulfillment and she is "perfectly free" (p. 242).

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