

Reflection of mental illness and female depression in the works of Sylvia Plath

By

Samiha Tasfia Chowdhury

ID: 19103052

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requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Samiha Tasfia Chowdhury

ID: 19103052

Approval

The thesis/project titled “Reflection of mental illness and female depression in the works of Sylvia Plath” submitted by Samiha Tasfia Chowdhury (ID: 19103052) of Summer 2023 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English.

Examining Committee:

Supervisor:
(Member)

Dr. Abu Sayeed Mohammad Noman
Assistant Professor, Department of English
and Humanities BRAC University

External Examiner:
(Member)

Raihan M. Sharif
Associate Professor
Department of English
New Arts Faculty Building
Jahangirnagar University

Departmental Head:
(Chair)

Professor Firdous Azim
Professor and Chairperson, Department of English
and Humanities
BRAC University

Dedication

I will dedicate this to Samiha, who has always cherished literature and discovered a new version of herself through literary exploration. Literature was present for her when no one else was. Literature was her companion in times of sadness, solitude, and happiness. She always used pen and paper rather than her voice to express herself. She found ultimate peace by writing about her emotions instead of verbalizing them. Indeed, literature is her closest companion.

This one is for you, my dear banker father, who has always supported my every decision. Without you, my beloved doctor mother, who was always encouraging, would not have seen this day. Last but not least, thank you for always being there my supportive husband, who falls asleep thinking about literature.

Acknowledgment

Reading books has always given me great pleasure, but turning a hobby into a career was not the best decision I could have made. So, when I first expressed an interest in studying English, everyone advised me against it. I was perplexed and conflicted about the decision I was making. Fortunately, I was accepted to a university where everyone was so friendly and approachable that I could not help but fall in love with the subject. This four-year journey was not easy for me, but BRAC University made it worthwhile. BRAC University helped me become a better student and a better person. I used to struggle a lot in school. However, after being admitted to BRAC University, I discovered a more mature version of myself. I found the best faculty members here who were always available to me when I needed them. I made some genuine friends who were always there for me. I met my wonderful husband here, for whom I will be eternally grateful. I will be eternally grateful to Abu Sayeed Mohammad Noman, sir, who always encouraged us to think outside the box. His classes were like magnetic fields that, if ended, would break one's heart. Sir never taught in the traditional way, which made his classes more interesting. I will always miss Sir's classes now that I have graduated. Sir's courses were always the first I took during advising every semester, and that has now come to an end. Sir not only assisted me during class hours, but he also assisted me and listened to my problems whenever I approached him. Sir, I will never be able to repay your kindness. I hope that everyone has a supportive faculty like you. Anika Saba, ma'am, is another faculty member who will always have a special place in my heart despite her departure from BRAC University. Madam made us read some incredible works of literature, which are still on my list of must-reads. Not to forget Seema Nusrat Amin, ma'am, my idol.

Abstract: Every time someone tries to be physically fit, they neglect their mental health, which is inextricably linked to their physical health. Without mental health, physical health is of no value. Both are equally essential to a person's well-being, but we consistently disregard our mental health. Moreover, our physical health is visible; for instance, if we cut ourselves, we can see the blood and know how to treat the wound. However, our mental health condition cannot be seen, and because it cannot be seen, everyone tends to be reluctant to discuss it. Consequently, our invisible health, which is equally as important as our physical health, became stigmatized. Unless we suffer from mental illness, few of us understand the significance of mental health. In the 1950s, the situation was significantly worse than it is currently. At that time, people were also sexually prejudiced, so a mentally ill woman was not everybody's cup of tea. No one dared to write empathetically about female mental illness and depression instead of labeling them "crazy women." Then there was Sylvia Plath, a writer of that era who suffered from mental illness and was courageous enough to write a semi-autobiographical work about it. Her literary works illustrated her struggle with mental illness and depression. In this paper, I would like to analyze the works of Sylvia Plath to discuss the issues of mental illness and depression in women. In my paper, female mental health will be prioritized as earlier research shows that women's mental health is always neglected compared to men's. In addition, I would like to connect this theme of mental issues to psychoanalytic theory and feminist literary criticism. I would also like to compare the current situation of mentally ill women worldwide with Sylvia Plath's works. My research paper aims to examine the theme of mental illness in Sylvia Plath's works.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Feminist Literature, Mental Illness, Female Depression

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Research Questions

- According to previous studies, why females' mental illness and depression is deprived more than men?
- What are the causes of Plath's mental instability and how did Sylvia Plath have mental illness and depression in her personal life, and how does this reflect in her works?

Methodology

To answer the research questions I posed, I intend to use a textual research method in my work. To focus my research, I will review prior studies on Sylvia Plath, connect them through closed readings of her novel and poems, collect academic evidence, and connect it to my approach or research gaps.

Introduction

American poet, novelist, and short story writer Sylvia Plath had a significant literary impact. She is regarded by many as one of the most influential authors of 20th-century literature. The complex and intensely personal way in which Plath explored issues like identity, gender roles, mental illness, and the human condition set her writing apart. Plath, born in Boston, Massachusetts, immediately made a name for herself as a talented writer. She published her first poem when she was eight and won numerous poetry awards. At Smith College, where she continued to compose and disseminate her work after receiving a scholarship for her academic excellence, Plath maintained her literary career. After Plath completed her studies at Smith College, she was awarded a Fulbright grant to attend the University of Cambridge in England. While residing in

England, she met Ted Hughes, a fellow poet, and the two were wed in 1956. The relationship between the two individuals was filled with ups and downs as they collaborated creatively while experiencing conflicts. Through her writing, Sylvia Plath delved into topics such as women's independence, the challenges of marriage and motherhood, and the importance of speaking one's truth in a society that often silences women. She occasionally used unsettling visuals to express her emotions in her works. One of her known pieces is *The Bell Jar*, a partially autobiographical novel that explores the protagonist's struggle with mental illness, an issue Plath herself grappled with throughout her life. Tragically Sylvia Plath took her life at the age of 30 in 1963. Despite her short lifespan, she impacted literature and influenced countless poets and novelists in subsequent generations. Plath is widely recognized as a figure within writing and confessional poetry movements – she is revered and extensively studied for good reason. Her writing is characterized by its intensity, honesty, and imagery, serving as a testament to the intricate nature of human experiences. It's likely that her personal encounters with illness and the loss of her father at an age influenced many of her poems. Her works often explore themes of sorrow, grief and the fragility of life.

This research paper will analyze Sylvia Plath's writings and discuss how they relate to female depression and mental illness. In her brief lifespan, Sylvia Plath, a poet and novelist of American descent, created exceptional masterpieces. She was a postmodern author with a short career who suffered from severe depression and mental illness. Her well-known, loosely autobiographical book *The Bell Jar* dealt with this subject. Her other works reflected her despair, especially her poetry since her personal life was filled with a series of traumatic incidents. This topic was primarily chosen because mental illness has always been taboo and has never received the attention it deserves. In addition, female mental illness was not prioritized because women did not receive

adequate recognition. As the weaker gender, women have always been deprived, especially regarding their mental health. Since gender inequality is part of the basic structure of a male-dominated society, men have always been privileged over women. Women's lives have been discounted while men's have been given more weight and value. Moreover, women have been subjected to severe limitations as a result of gender discrimination. As a result of patriarchal norms and chauvinist beliefs, women have often been stigmatized as emotionally unstable. Women's shared experiences of oppression in settings where males hold power are the root cause of many gender stereotypes. Therefore, "woman" is a category that has been generated artificially for political and social reasons (Stanley and Wise 1990, 21). Therefore, gender is not a biological trait like sex but rather a product of society, culture, and politics. Indeed, women have faced inequality on both the personal and societal levels due to their gender. No one has been allowed to speak up for them for a long time period. The socially enforced gender hierarchy is to blame for this phenomenon. There is little doubt that patriarchy has been intrinsically linked to the subjugation and oppression of women and the development of gendered identities. Patriarchy is a prevalent phenomenon that has been encouraged at every level of society, including the family, where it has led to discrimination against women. In Sylvia Plath's era, postmodern women lacked gratitude, and female mental illness was not discussed. Sylvia Plath dared to break those barriers and write about them. At the time of Plath, when the second wave of feminism occurred, women's position had a long way to go regarding advancement. Ironically, from the 1950s to the present day, women's mental health has not been accorded the importance it deserves. Since the beginning of time, it has been established that female mental illness is inherently gendered (Hockey 1993, 254). In other words, women's mental health has suffered because of their gendered identities. Women's

limited societal responsibilities, such as caregivers and housekeepers, have also resulted in severe psychological trauma.

Similarly, the movement of women to reject their assigned roles and conventional images has been viewed as a form of mental illness. Furthermore, insanity is often explained as a reaction to the tension between an internal drive for freedom and an external reality of dependence (Hockey 1993, 254). Indeed, the motivation underlying women's rejection of their socially mandated subservient role has been the feminine consciousness. Indeed, the concept of insanity has been prevalent in women's writing throughout history. Female writers and poets like Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, have often paid with their mental health the price of expressing themselves creatively in an androcentric culture, similar to their female protagonists. Therefore, in this paper, firstly, the discussion will start with mental illness and mainly focus on women's mental illness. Then it will be associated with Plath's mental condition and connect with her novel and poetry as it is linked with psychology so that the psychoanalytic theory will be interconnected. Additionally, as the paper focuses on female mental health, the research would be seen from a feminist point of view by relating it to Plath's works.

Literature Review

Mental illness and depression are prevalent among adults as well as teenagers. In 2017, approximately 264 million individuals worldwide suffered from depression, with an additional 970 million suffering from a mental or drug use problem. (Dattani et al, 2021) Every fourth person in the world will experience mental illness at some point. Given that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 8 men

share a common mental disease (such as anxiety or depression), women are more affected than males (Kessler, Ronald C et al, 2007).

After her first unsuccessful suicide attempt when she was 20 years old, Plath was given a depressive diagnosis. She experienced multiple relapses of severe depression (without psychotic symptoms). Psychosis is a mental disorder characterized by a breakdown in reality perception and other associated symptoms. When experiencing psychosis, it might be difficult to distinguish between genuine and imagined events in one's surroundings. Although Plath never experienced a manic episode, she most likely went through episodes of hypomania. Mania and hypomania are states characterized by excessively spirited and high-energy behavior, which can have severe consequences for daily functioning. Compared to manic episodes, hypomanic episodes are less intense and last less time. This is often a couple of days but can last up to a week or more. The extreme type is known as mania. At the age of 30, she committed suicide violently. Sylvia Plath put her head inside a gas oven after taking a bottle of sleeping pills. Plath may have committed suicide and suffered from a psychological disease due to several circumstances. Her premonitory personality was prone to depression, and her family history was favorable. Her personality exhibited histrionic (dramatic), narcissistic, and borderline traits. Premorbidity is defined as the level of health and functioning an individual possesses before the development of a medical condition or illness. Its most common application is in the realm of psychology, while it has a broader medical application as well. Bipolar II, affective disorder, and mixed personality disorder were Plath's most likely diagnosis (Németh, 2019). An individual with a mixed personality disorder has characteristics of more than one of the 10 recognized personality disorders. Personality disorders have distinct diagnostic criteria, yet a person may exhibit signs or symptoms of multiple disorders at the same time without matching the prerequisites for any of them.

Previously known as manic depression, bipolar disorder is a mental illness defined by alternating periods of emotion (mania or hypomania) and depressive symptoms. Feelings of sorrow and hopelessness, as well as a general lack of enthusiasm in life, are common symptoms of depression. Feelings of excitement, increased energy, and unusual irritability are all possible symptoms of manic or hypomanic episodes. Mood fluctuations have been linked to disruptions in sleep, energy, action, decision-making, behavior, and cognitive function (Németh, 2019).

Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide after undergoing electroconvulsive treatment and psychotherapy for psychiatric disorder multiple times, is an intriguing instance in the connection between literature and psychiatry, which is relevant within her literary works. The ineffective treatment of her condition and the suspension of intensive psychotherapy may have led to her premature death. In addition to bipolar affective disorder, she had severe dispositional violence and emotional dependence. The writing was both a source of stress for her because her dysthymia heightened her inhibitions and a means of self-healing and self-fulfillment for her. A milder but more persistent form of depression is called dysthymia. Persistent depressive disorder is another name for this condition. Some people with this disorder also experience major depression. Women are twice as likely to experience dysthymia as males. Depression and bipolar illness are also possible in some cases. Plath's confessionalism has its roots in her personality development stalled at becoming an adult and her failure to move through her traumas (Gerevich, 2019). The study of mental pathologies and abnormal, often harmful, behaviors is known as psychopathology. Mental health specialists in psychiatry and psychology require to know how these conditions begin. The line between abnormal and eccentric behavior is a point of contention in the field of psychology. Several studies and hypotheses claim a link between psychopathology and artistic creativity,

implying that madness and genius characters have similar origins. Bipolar mood disorder is much overrepresented among writers and artists compared to the general population. Many cognitive and other psychological components of creative creativity share similarities with the symptomatology of hypomania. It can be concluded that bipolar mood traits may contribute to highly inventive artistic achievements. The requirement for more excellent medical care is necessary at the same time in light of the risks (Janka, 2004).

With the release of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, a new genre of poetry known as "Confessional Poetry" entered American literature in 1959, marking a significant turning point in the country's literary history. In America in the late 1950s, confessional poetry attracted the most attention and appeal. All of the prominent poets of this era experienced severe personal difficulties. Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Allen Ginsberg, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton were the leading representatives of this school. All of the traits of the confessional school are present in Sylvia Plath. She immediately demonstrates Lowell and other confessional contemporaries' profound influence on her poetry. Language experimentation was encouraged by Sylvia Plath. She inadvertently supported the modern expressionism and surrealism initiative by viewing chance, spontaneity, true confession, loneliness, and subjectivity as severe issues. Before World War I, European society was characterized by materialism, bourgeois complacency, growing industrialization and development, and the family's dominant role in society. During and right after World War I, it dominated German literature. The surrealists' attempts to reconcile the disparities between their conscious and unconscious selves are reflected in their stories' often striking juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated elements. It seeks an equilibrium between the two opposing worldviews, realism and the primacy of dreams and the unconscious. Artists associated

with the movement place value on the unusual, the out of the ordinary, and the unorthodox. This allowed her to handle both current and personal issues, and she never felt hesitant to share her dirty secrets or private scars. Her poem "Daddy" is exemplary of confessional poetry at large and a fine illustration of Plath's propensity for influential issues. The title "Daddy" suggests that this poem is a reaction to Plath's relationship with and memories of her father, who passed away when she was just eight years old. Plath's conflicting feelings about her father's death are reflected in this poem and in many others in which he is shown as a prominent character. There is no doubt in Sylvia Plath's affiliation with the confessional movement, but there are key ways in which she varies from other confessional writers. She was quick enough to sail enthusiastically in the confessionalism's direction, but not with the same fervor as other poets who exposed themselves in their works (Sayeed). Plath stands out from other confessional poets because of the dramatic quality of her writing. She shares the same age and handles the same subject matter as the other confessionalists, but her approach to poetry and her poetic style is very different. Plath's writing has a level of determination to share the emotions of her tormented mind with the reader, which is uncommon among confessional authors. For Plath, work and life are inseparable. As Plath also used confessionalism in her works, her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, was a semi-autobiography. This novel's plot reflects her life; the main theme is her mental illness. These are by no means simple questions to respond to, particularly in the case of *The Bell Jar*, which was initially published under a pseudonym because Sylvia Plath herself considered it an "autobiographical apprentice work," a confession that, according to A. Alvarez, she felt she needed to write to free herself from the past. The novel's huge appeal seems to have more to do with its naturally titillating subject matter than with any artistic value it may possess. This fascinating work follows the breakdown of Esther Greenwood, who is described so melodramatically on the dust jacket of the Harper

edition: "Brilliant, beautiful, enormously talented, and successful but slowly going under, and perhaps for the last time." (Perloff, 1972) The novel *The Bell Jar* is considered semi-autobiographical because Sylvia Plath draws significantly from her experiences. First published in 1963, Plath's novel is a remarkable representation of a typical American white female student at college in the 1950s. Feminist fiction that critiques restrictive patriarchal binaries while eloquently transmitting the societal context of the time through its protagonist, Esther Greenwood. She begins to challenge stereotypical gender roles at the start of the story. Esther is a young woman from the provinces who relocates to New York City to intern at a magazine. This parallels Plath's experiences as a young woman who moved to New York City to work for Mademoiselle Magazine. Plath, like Esther, had a mental illness and was treated with electroconvulsive therapy. The depiction of Esther's mental illness and treatment in the novel is based on Plath's own experiences. The novel also examines the themes of gender and identity. Plath, like Esther, struggled to find her position in a society where women are frequently marginalized.

A wonderful reference for learning about the limited gender norms pushed upon women by the media in the 1950s is Betty Friedan's profoundly influential text *The Feminine Mystique*, which was originally published in the same year as *The Bell Jar*. The author contributed to a number of female-oriented publications, including Sylvia Plath's former workplace, Mademoiselle. Friedan criticized women's magazines for reducing women's aspirations by portraying housework as the pinnacle of female achievement (Walker, 129). Since the media not only reflects but also shapes our reality, her analysis has the potential to reveal incredibly beneficial information on women's experiences in the 1950s. While *The Bell Jar* is not a direct account of Plath's life, it is significantly influenced by her experiences and emotions. The novel is frequently interpreted as Plath's method of processing her struggles and exploring the oppressive nature of society towards women. *The*

Bell Jar highlights the protagonist's battles with depression and her experiences with various medical treatments, making mental illness a central element of the book. The book captures Plath's unique perspective of the world when she was already experiencing severe depression and provides an accurate account of the unnecessary medical procedures she underwent. (Luna, 2007) One article examines the function of colors during the protagonist's illness and demonstrates how they alter as she deteriorates. Compared to the book's second half, which depicts her depression's crucial and irreversible state, the first half's colors are more startling, as if she felt inundated by the harsh circumstances that led to her sickness. (Luna, 2008) However, towards the latter half of the book, the colors are more muted and distancing, demonstrating the depth and permanence of her despair. Resistance to a typical domestic lifestyle is a factor in the protagonist's mental illness and is related to it. Virginia Woolf, in her groundbreaking critical work *A Room of One's Own* (1929), examined the barriers to women's creative expression that the patriarchal system erects on cultural, economic, and educational levels. She showed that a woman with Shakespeare's intelligence would not have had the same possibilities that he did by creating the character of Judith, Shakespeare's fictitious sister. Woolf argued, through an analysis of the lives and works of women writers like Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters, that women are socialized to read from a male perspective and to internalize the artistic and literary principles established by male writers and critics within the patriarchal structure. The novel repeatedly brings up her father's memory to show how his passing still strongly affects her (Benard, 2011). Sylvia Plath's life, diaries, and writings may provide significant evidence for scholars attempting to understand patriarchal and biased society. She was a woman who defied expectations, as evidenced by her confession in a diary that she did not even know who she was. She said that she had once thought of herself as "the girl who sought to be like Deity," but later she wrote that she knew she

could never achieve such perfection. Her father's sudden death was the source of all her mental distress as a child. She refused to face the harsh truths of her situation. She repeatedly attempted suicide because she took comfort in the idea of death and saw it as an escape from the real world. The difficulty of shifting the attitudes of one's community and one's loved ones was another factor contributing to her thoughts of self-harm. The text provides a thorough and meticulously detailed investigation of mental illness, stressing the pressures the female protagonist is subjected to against her will and how they negatively impact her well-being. Plath raises the question of where the "illness" really rests by connecting these external causes of oppression with an inward mental breakdown: the protagonist's surroundings appear to be sicker than hers. (Martos, 2017)

Themes of mental illness, suicide, and depression are prevalent in Plath's poetry. Many of the poems in her most well-known collection, "Ariel," which was written during intense emotional anguish, deal with these subjects. Many people view Plath's poetry as a mechanism for her to process her difficulties and investigate how society may oppress women. (Martos, 2017). Plath also incorporates the use of color in her poetry employing impactful imagery to express her emotions. (Luna, 2008 2007) Plath's personal struggles with sadness and mental health issues influenced her poems significantly. Her own encounters with illness and the loss of her father during childhood likely served as inspiration for many of her works, which frequently explore themes of grief, melancholy and mortality. A prevailing interpretation of Plath's poetry is that it serves as a means for her to reflect on her experiences and emotions while examining how societal expectations and limitations shape them. (Benard, 2011) Writings by Sylvia Plath frequently allude to her struggles with mental illness and hopelessness. Many view her poems as a means of

exploring how cultural standards may cause difficulty while helping her manage her ideas and feelings.

Many believe Sylvia Plath to be a precursor of the current feminist movement; her works have been referenced as proof of the hostility many women experience as a result of their inability to break away from established gender norms (Bassnett, 1987). The patriarchal systems through which women are oppressed are examined in Plath's poetry. It is the dominant ideology in a field of two unequal contenders; no alternative system that might be more accommodating to women has ever proven to have such a firm hold on its followers (Millet, 1969). Plath's poetry is frequently characterized by vibrant and intense imagery, which can be interpreted as expressing her emotions and exploring how societal pressures and expectations can contribute to a person's mental health struggles. For instance, many of Plath's poems deal with themes of melancholy, suicide, and mental illness, likely influenced by her experiences with these issues (Martos, 2017). Some of these poems are "Tulips", "Elm", "The Moon and The Yew Tree", "Face Lift" etc.

The usage of Holocaust images in the poem "Daddy" is contentious but undeniably compelling. At various points in the poem, she refers to her father's "German tongue," "neat mustache," and "Aryan eye," all of which paint him in a negative light and makes him seem like a Nazi. She even goes so far as to portray herself as a Jew, describing an "engine" that whisks her away to concentration camps like Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen. To build an "oppressor-oppressed" dynamic between herself and her father, Plath uses such metaphors. The poem's nursery-rhyme elements and other childish themes also indicate Plath's affinity to and difficulties with her father's memories. Plath's attempt to substitute her husband, Ted Hughes, for her father is also acknowledged in the poem. She calls him "the vampire who said he was you" and "a man in black with a Meinkampf look," contrasting him with the Nazi stereotype of her father. The strength of

Plath's poetry comes from her lack of fear in revealing even the most private components of her life. Despite how unpleasant or unsettling it may be, the insight into Plath's inner psyche is what makes "Daddy" a confessional poem. She discusses her struggles, including her attempts at suicide, as a result of her father's absence.

Sylvia Plath's writings have several connections to psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic theory holds that an unconscious mind largely influences a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Plath's writings frequently present themes of repression, trauma, and the struggle to accept one's own emotions. In *The Bell Jar*, for example, Plath examines how social pressures can affect someone's mental health difficulties through the protagonist's struggles with mental illness and her efforts to fit in in a culture that usually marginalizes women. (Luna, 2008, 2007) The importance of early life events in influencing a person's personality and emotional growth is also emphasized by psychoanalytic thought. Themes of loss, sadness, and mortality are prevalent throughout Plath's works, probably affected by her own experiences with her father's death when she was a young child. For instance, it is possible to interpret Plath's exploration of how a person's early experiences can influence their emotional development and fuel their battles with mental health issues in *The Bell Jar* as a way to examine how the protagonist's struggles with her father's passing and her relationship with her mother (Benard, 2011). The psychoanalytic theory also accentuates the unconscious mind's influence on an individual's creative output. Several threads of psychoanalytic thought run through Sylvia Plath's writings. The core themes of psychoanalytic theory, repression, trauma, and the struggle to come to terms with one's own emotions are frequently explored throughout her works. She also often examines the role of one's upbringing and cultural forces in developing mental illness in her works.

In numerous ways, Sylvia Plath's works can be related to feminist literary theory. Themes of gender discrimination, societal pressures, and the struggle for women to find their position in a patriarchal society frequently recur in Plath's works. In *The Bell Jar*, for instance, the protagonist's struggles with mental illness and attempts to find her place in a society that often sidelines women can be interpreted as a way for Plath to examine how societal pressures can contribute to an individual's mental health issues. By addressing this, Plath writes in *The Bell Jar*:

“He was always saying how his mother said, "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," until it made me tired.” (Plath, 57)

Mrs. Williard, the mother of Buddy Williard (Esther's love interest), objectifies women as a mating product in this quote. This mindset was very common among people at the time, especially among women. This was also the mindset of a woman who should be helping other women. As a result, it was difficult for women who used to rebel against these social stigmas because other women of their gender did not support them. It was common for one woman to be an enemy of another. Sylvia Plath's writings might be seen as a protest against the patriarchal culture she inhabited and a call for more gender equality. Plath's writings contain material on loss, sadness, and grief, commonly related to women's lives. For instance, it is possible to read *The Bell Jar*, which explores how a person's early experiences can affect their emotional development and contribute to their struggles with mental health issues, as a story about the protagonist dealing with her father's death and her relationship with her mother. As written in the novel:

“I didn't know shorthand either. This meant I couldn't get a good job after college. My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand would be something else again. Everybody would want her” (Plath 113).

Esther questions her dreams because of her mother's opinions. Gerisch says, "The driving force of her creativity was to satisfy her mother and to repay her for the deprivations of her life by being a successful daughter." “Tyrannized by painful self-doubts and afraid of not achieving her own ego-ideal,” she was (Gerisch, 744). This quotation shows that Esther's passion in life is to please her mother, and when her mother thinks she needs shorthand in addition to an English degree, her confidence plummets. Plath also writes:

“‘I’ve got to get out of here,’ I told her meaningly... To my surprise, my mother said, ‘All right, I’ll try to get you out...If I try to get you out,’ she laid a hand on my knee, ‘promise you’ll be good?’” (Plath 179)

Esther's mother's naivety about Esther's mental illness demonstrates that she still sees her as a projection of her ideal and that this mental hospital stay is merely a blip. Even after multiple suicide attempts, one of which was dangerously close, Esther's mother seems to think she is acting this way by choice and that if she cooperates more, she will be allowed to leave the hospital and everything will be well. She rarely confides in her mother while seeing Esther in the hospital. She expects her daughter to remain flawless, so she says this to her. Gerisch says this is because mothers cannot let go of their child's future, which usually does not include a mental patient. “Idealization of the daughter...from the beginning obstructed individuation, in the sense of defining the other’s expectations, wishes, needs, ideals, and norms” (Gerisch, 745). Gerisch discusses the mother's bewilderment, who does not understand or does not want to understand her daughter's demands and wants her to change.

Plath's writings might be seen as a method for her to process her own experiences and emotions by examining how social pressures and expectations can intensify a person's struggles with mental health issues. A critique of the objectification and subjugation of women in society may also be seen in Plath's writings. For instance, Plath explores how women are routinely turned into objects of male desire and how this can affect their mental health difficulties in *The Bell Jar* through the protagonist's encounters with sexual harassment and objectification. Sylvia Plath's writings can be viewed as a means of resisting the patriarchal standards and expectations she came into contact with. In the novel Plath writes:

“There was no one hundred per cent sure way not to have a baby, it said 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 and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn't know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman. This woman lawyer said the 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 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. The woman finished her article by saying better be safe than sorry and besides, there was no sure way

of not getting stuck with a baby and then you'd really be in a pickle. Now the one thing this article didn't seem to me to consider was how a girl felt.”(Plath, 63)

Esther's mother sent her an article about chastity. This demonstrates how her mother was concerned about her chastity but not her mental health. The article was highly misogynistic, which was common at the time. The article confirms that women should not have sex before marriage and should instead save themselves for their husbands. Conversely, men can have sex before marriage because they are so different from women. Also, men do not get pregnant, so even if they had sex before marriage, they are not forced to have a child. A husband should be the first man to teach his wife about sex. It is also normal for a man to entice a woman to have sex with him before marriage, but if a woman does this, the man will believe she can do it with anyone. The hypocrisy of patriarchal society is evident here, as a man may tempt a woman to have sex with him while also rejecting that woman for having sex with him. Herein lies a woman's control over her chastity that she cannot have sex before marriage, no matter what.

The writings of Sylvia Plath can also be interpreted as an examination of how women are silenced and marginalized in society. For instance, Plath explores how women's voices are routinely silenced and ignored in *The Bell Jar* through the protagonist's battles with mental illness and her attempts to find her place in a society that frequently marginalizes women. There is written in the novel:

“These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil.”

(Plath, 10)

This shows how different Esther was compared to typical women of that time. Her life does not revolve around marriage and she does not find any attraction about the topic of marriage. She does not envy these women rather she detests them. This makes Esther a black sheep in society and she faces various problems because of this. A woman who does not fall under the typical characteristics of women that society expects is often neglected. In the novel, Esther goes under the same treatment as she was not like other girls of her age.

It is feasible to comprehend Plath's writings as a way for her to oppose patriarchal norms that silence women and give voice to their experiences and emotions. A part in the novel where Plath writes:

My name's Elly Higginbottom," I said. "I come from Chicago." After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston. "Well, Elly, what do you say we dance some?" (Plath, 15)

Here Esther hides her identity to talk with a guy. Talking to a guy and drinking with a guy at a club was not seen as a suitable manner for a woman. Women should reserve them for their husbands. But Esther wanted to enjoy her time at the club and to do so, she lied to the guy about her identity. She was in a dilemma about being a good girl or enjoying her youth freely. She was scared that if someone finds out that she is at a club and drinking with guys, then everyone would see her from a different point of view. This is very saddening that most men can go to clubs and drink but when it came to women, they should not be doing it for their decency. To enjoy a pleasant time by herself at a club, a woman has to lie about her identity so that no one can know about her doings. This social discrimination of gender is very prominent in this novel.

A feminist analysis of Sylvia Plath's portrayal of marital suffering is presented in an article, which contends that Sylvia Plath's portrayal of matrimonial afflictions is a protest against patriarchal oppression. For example, in the novel, Plath writes,

“This hotel--the Amazon--was for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.” (Plath, 10)

The novel is set in the 1950s, and this quote can provide insight into women during that era. The only important task for women at the time was to marry. It made no difference how well-educated or capable they were. The only thing that mattered was one's ability to find a good husband. Parents enrolled their daughters in thriving educational institutions and placed them in all-female hotels to prevent other men from corrupting them before marriage. This demonstrates how a woman was showered with opportunities only to marry.

A woman is often unable to express herself in a society where patriarchal norms are prevalent and is smothered by her inner suffering. Plath attempts to subvert conventions in her poetry by depicting patriarchal marriage as an unjust institution that regards women as property. Her feminist perspective is demonstrated by her intentional representation of the psychological pain brought on by her marital existence. The poet recounts how her husband's controlling behavior exposed her freedom of choice and "self" consciousness. She describes her miserable and ill-fated marriage in a number of her poetry. For instance, the poet uses the metaphor of an "eel" fish to compare herself

to herself in the opening verse of "Zoo Keeper's Wife," highlighting the troubled state of her mind. She no longer feels in love as a result of her husband's neglect; instead, she strives to overcome the mental breakdown her husband's carelessness caused. The zookeeper's neglected wife, who suffers from psychosomatic sterility, battles with sleep deprivation. The imagery in this poem depicts her life in her husband's abhorrent animal kingdom. Due to her husband's psycho-social separation, the speaker spends the entire night awake like an eel fish, "without eyelids" (2), illustrating how unhappy her marriage is. She feels lonely and abandoned like a "dead lake" (3) engulfed in doom since he inhabits a realm that she can scarcely enter. As a result, it is possible to identify the speaker's spouse in this poem as "not just obese, pig-headed and powerful, but also insensitive or purposefully oblivious to the wife's sentiment" (Rajani 148). In "Zoo Keeper's Wife," the narrator talks about her plight in terms of animal imagery and blames the spouse, the 'you' of the poem, for the present unfortunate state," according to the narrator (Rajani 147). She makes various attempts to develop a mental bond with her spouse, but all are unsuccessful, and her sorrows end up becoming her lifelong companions. Numerous critics have noted that Plath's marital troubles led to her suicide, which was a form of protest and resistance against patriarchy. Since her poetry represents both her psychosocial distress and her struggle against the limits imposed by a patriarchal society, her poetry may be viewed as a weapon for liberating her "self" and other women's minds from male-dominated confinement. The article explores how Plath's poetic persona emerges as the "Phoenix", the libertarian spirit, by exposing her marital sufferings, psychosexual torture, husband's infidelity, and the ultimate death resulting from marital unhappiness, interpreted as a protest against all forms of patriarchal discrimination (Mozumder, 2020).

Awareness of mental health concerns can be raised by drawing parallels between Sylvia Plath's writings and the current state of women's mental health, which has improved since Plath's time but still needs more recognition from society. Plath's writings, especially *The Bell Jar*, address universal human experiences, including mental illness, loss, grief, and heartbreak. We can see the progress we have made in understanding and treating mental health issues, as well as the work that remains to be done in removing the stigma and removing the barriers that prevent women from seeking help for their mental health issues, by comparing and contrasting Plath's works with the mental health status of women today. Awareness of mental health concerns can also be raised through Plath's writings because they show how societal pressures and expectations are a factor in many people's mental health problems. For instance, in *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist's battles with societal pressures to adhere to a typical home lifestyle can be interpreted as a vehicle for Plath to investigate how such expectations can exacerbate an individual's mental health problems. We may work toward a more welcoming and helpful culture by highlighting how social pressures contribute to mental health problems. Furthermore, as discussed above, the concept of gender has been an important aspect that has a close connection with the prevalence of mental disorders like anxiety, craziness, hysteria, depression and schizophrenia among women. What women go through because of gender roles and depictions may be detrimental to their psychological well-being. As a matter of fact, women have always more mental health issues than men. Plath's exploration of the marginalization and silencing of women's voices may be seen, for instance, in *The Bell Jar* through the protagonist's mental illness and attempts to find her place in a society that often marginalizes women.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Sylvia Plath

1.1 Background and Context

This dissertation examines how the American poet and writer Sylvia Plath's works were affected by mental illness, specifically female depression. Her lifelong and uphill battle with mental health concerns profoundly informed her evocative poetry and contemplative prose and left an indelible mark on her artistic trajectory. This research examines the subtle and profound ways her personal experiences and emotional anguish functioned as a wellspring for her unequaled artistic production through a careful and comprehensive analysis of her main literary works. A witness to the unedited and raw feelings that resonate through the halls of her mind may be seen woven intricately into the fabric of Plath's works. Her poetry, such as "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Ariel," is a moving witness to her inner turmoil and her battle to find an outlet for her thoughts and feelings. She used symbolism and imagery to construct a vibrant tapestry of her inner world, providing an uncompromising look into the tangled corridors of her brain, all drawn from her own life experiences. This in-depth analysis of Plath's life, from her time at Smith College through her turbulent marriage to poet Ted Hughes, reveals sadness's pervasive impact on her writing. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, Plath closely examines her spiral into depression. The story takes readers on a journey of self-discovery and anguish with Plath. The restrictive restrictions placed on women in the mid-20th century are exposed as the author dissects societal norms and gender roles. This thesis sheds light on the mysterious relationship between Plath's mental health issues and her creative genius via the lenses of literary interpretation and psychological investigation. Examining the author's mental condition in connection to the diverse characters who populate her works, this research delves into the intricate psychology of her characters to do just that. Though grounded in her own life, Plath's writings have an enduring quality that transcends time and place. The universality and eerie fascination of her writing stem

from the depth with which she explores the human condition, the seduction of death, and the search for one's own identity. This study aims to shed light on the lasting value of her literary achievements and their modern relevance. As we set out on this enlightening adventure, we learn important things about the intersection of art and mental health, the healing potential of literature, and the special place that literature holds in the fight against mental illness stigma.

Furthermore, this thesis is a monument to Sylvia Plath's ongoing impact as a literary icon whose works continue to be an unstoppable force in the landscape of literature and mental health debate. By delving into her most private reflections and artistic output, we catch a look into the maze of her mind and meet the profound and indomitable human spirit that discovers consolation and salvation in the transformative power of creative expression.

American poet, novelist, and short story writer Sylvia Plath endured a difficult upbringing and a life filled with intense mental and emotional anguish. She showed early signs of extraordinary creative aptitude after being born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1932. Plath's early life was profoundly impacted by her father's death, which had a long-lasting effect on her psyche (Axelrod, 2018). She attended Smith College on a full scholarship to her growing reputation as an excellent student and writer. However, Plath's first severe depressive episode and suicide attempt occurred during her undergraduate years, marking the beginning of a lifetime struggle with mental illness.

1.1.1 The Mid-20th Century Sociocultural Landscape

The cultural and social climate of the middle of the twentieth century is crucial for appreciating Sylvia Plath's writings in their proper context. Women at the time struggled to find their place in society, under intense pressure to conform to established gender stereotypes. They were expected

to shoulder the bulk of household labor (Brain, 2018). The difficulties that people with mental illness, like Plath, already experienced were compounded by the era's stigmatizing views on the subject and the lack of available treatment options.

1.2 Objectives and Scope of the Study

The primary purpose of this thesis is to thoroughly examine how Sylvia Plath's creative works are affected by her mental illness, namely her sadness. It wants to learn how her mental health concerns informed her creative process and her choice of themes by delving into her poetry, prose, and personal writings. In addition, this research aims to illuminate how Plath's lived experience as a woman in the mid-20th century impacted her depiction of gender roles, societal expectations, and the representation of female identity in her writings.

1.2.1 Literary Analysis and Psychological Exploration

Plath's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, and her poems "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Ariel" will be dissected in detail to reveal the layers of meaning and symbolism within them. In addition, it will utilize a psychological lens to grasp better the author's intentions and the inner workings of her characters.

1.3 Significance of the Research

This study's contributions to literature, psychology, and gender studies make it noteworthy. Examining Sylvia Plath's writings will help readers understand how mental illness affects the creative process (Corrigan, 2014). Literature is emphasized as a source of catharsis and a channel

for emotional release, and this study tries to show how Plath's challenges are relevant to those of other artists and creatives.

In addition, debates on gender equality and the difficulties women confront in patriarchal countries would benefit from the study's emphasis on the female experience and gender roles throughout the middle of the twentieth century. The findings have the potential to increase compassion and understanding for those who, like those in the study, struggle with mental health concerns while still juggling the demands of daily life. It sets out on a trip into the depths of human feeling, the strength of creative expression, and the evergreen relevance of Sylvia Plath's literary and mental health contributions as it dives into her life, mental health, and literary works.

Chapter 2: Sylvia Plath's Life and Mental Health

2.1 Biography of Sylvia Plath

American poet, novelist, and short story writer Sylvia Plath was born in Boston on October 27, 1932. As seen by her stellar academic performance and several literary accolades, intellectual precocity and a love of reading defined Plath's formative years. Otto Plath, Plath's father, was a well-known entomologist, and Aurelia Schober Plath, her mother, was a devoted housewife. Plath's emotional and mental health was profoundly affected by the sudden death of her father when she was just eight years old (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For her superior intelligence, Plath was granted a full scholarship at Smith College, where she received several accolades for her work. Depression and an existential crisis were the first signs of mental health problems she had to deal with throughout her time at Smith. These trials hinted at the mental turmoil characterizing much of her life and work. In 1955, after completing her undergraduate degree at Smith, Plath was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to attend graduate school at Newnham College, University of

Cambridge. The friendship between Plath and English poet Ted Hughes, which began during their time together at Cambridge, greatly influenced her writing. The intensity and turmoil of Plath's feelings throughout her marriage to Hughes may be seen in her poems and short fiction. Despite her literary achievements, Plath had a troubled personal life and experienced intense emotional problems. Her mental health suffered greatly when her marriage to Hughes ended, and they separated, triggering clinical depression and many failed suicide attempts. As a consequence of her issues, she committed suicide at the age of 30 on February 11, 1963.

2.2 The Bell Jar: A Journey through Depression

The Bell Jar is set in the 1950s when societal expectations and gender standards made it hard for women to succeed. Plath takes us on a scary journey into Esther's mind as she sinks deeper into sadness and searches for meaning in a world that seems to crush her spirit. *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath's most famous work, explores feminine grief. Under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, Plath's 1963 semi-autobiographical novel, an account of her mental condition, was published. Esther Greenwood, Plath's protagonist, exposes women's depression. Plath brilliantly portrays the confining and lonely feeling of despair via Esther's story. The bell jar, an airtight glass box, metaphorically represents the protagonist's oppressive isolation and disconnection from the world. Plath expertly depicts the inner pain and isolation that are hallmarks of despair by weaving together vivid images and compelling words. By delving deeply into Esther's mind, the novel challenges preconceived notions about mental illness. They shed light on the marginalized experiences of young women in the middle of the twentieth century.

2.3 The Effects of Depression and Other Mental Difficulties

Sylvia Plath's mental health and writing ability were hindered by her struggle with depression. Her mental health was reflected in her personal life and creative work. Hopelessness, persistent

melancholy, and an overpowering feeling of emotional emptiness were all symptoms of Plath's depression. Everything in her life, from her studies to her relationships, was overcast by sadness. Despite her many achievements, Plath struggled with crippling self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. She bravely expressed this inner turmoil via her poetry. Plath's seclusion and hopelessness throughout her depression caused her to develop a cynical view of humanity. Her poems, mainly "Ariel," explored themes of death and rebirth and an unending quest for personal freedom that embodied the profound emotional terrain linked with her mental health difficulties.

The posthumous publication of "Ariel" in 1965 also marked a notable change in Plath's poetry technique and subject concentration. She overcame adversity by writing poetry on personal growth and independence. In her poem "Ariel," Plath beautifully depicts a horse and its rider rising above the earth's limitations, encapsulating the poet's longing for independence and freedom. As she reflects on her life, her inner literary soul undergoes a metamorphosis, and this poem reflects her yearning to release her mind from its burdens.

Chapter 3: Representing Emotional Distress in Plath's Poems

3.1 Analysis of Prominent Poems that Deal with Emotional Discord

The emotional upheaval that Sylvia Plath experienced due to her bipolar disease is captured in her poetry. In her 1965 posthumously released masterwork "Daddy," Plath reveals her complex relationship with her late father, Otto. Her sentiments of desertion, betrayal, and uncontrollable rage were all exposed in this poem. As Plath struggles with unresolved emotions, the reader is taken on a trip through spare yet evocative language (Friedan, 1963).

Another classic, "Lady Lazarus," deals with themes of death and rebirth via striking images of suicide and reincarnation. This poem captures Plath's struggle for autonomy and independence in the face of overpowering emotional waves and serves as a moving expression of her recurring

suicide ideas. The vivid and eerie picture of "Lady Lazarus" creates a disturbing and exciting exploration of her mental torment.

3.2 Suicide ideation, despondency, and a sense of isolation

As she struggles with mental illness, Plath frequently writes about being alone and feeling hopeless in her poems. In "Tulips," floral symbolism symbolizes vibrancy and life, starkly contrasting the clinical hospital ward backdrop. The poem skillfully negotiates the conflicting needs for healing and the appeal of the dulling comfort that grief offers. Plath expertly depicts her inner turmoil and the contradictory character of her experiences through contrasting images.

Plath's suicidal ideas are in her final piece, "Edge," where her views on death reverberate powerfully. Her inner anguish was so great that it forced her to passionately investigate the depths of despair and the allure of self-destruction. The language in the poem is piercingly precise, evoking a feeling of helplessness and providing an unfiltered glimpse into the poet's anguish for the reader.

3.3 Relying on Metaphor and Imagery to Express Emotional Struggle

Sylvia Plath's poetry is full of resonant symbolism and vivid imagery that convey her inner agony with striking clarity. The mirror is personified in the poetry "Mirror" to represent the speaker's internal conflict as she confronts the inevitability of aging. For of her skillful use of symbolism and imagery, reading Plath is like being transported inside the complex maze of her troubled mind. Readers may feel Plath's intense pain and exposure to vulnerability because of her skillful writing. Introspective and deep, the examination of Sylvia Plath's poems reveals the author's struggles with mental health. By delving into the meaning of some of Sylvia Plath's most famous pieces like "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Ariel," one may get a thorough look into the struggles she faced inside. Plath's poems and short stories reveal her intense loneliness, despair, and even suicidal

thoughts. The effective use of symbolism and imagery in Plath's writing is evidence of her mastery at conveying inside turmoil. This skill further establishes her as a poet who boldly explores the inner workings of the human mind. People struggling with mental health have found solace and an outlet for their feelings in this person's poems. The mirror's weathered appearance symbolized Plath's ongoing struggle with self-doubt and discontent. In *The Bell Jar*, an essential work by Sylvia Plath, the author uses a bell jar as a metaphor to portray the intense isolation and suffocation she experiences due to her mental illness. The bell jar breaking symbolizes the protagonist's disconnection from the world and her feelings. The offered description vividly depicts the crushing despair that readers will feel.

Chapter 4: Representation of Female Depression in Plath's Prose

4.1 The Impact of Sylvia Plath's Trials on Her Creativity

Sylvia Plath's work was forged in the fire of her personal experience. Her writing became a safe haven where she could channel her anguish into beautiful descriptions and powerful sentences. Plath adopted a confessional language (Friedan, 1963), exposing her most profound reflections and feelings in her examination of subjects encompassing love, sorrow, introspection, and the very core of being human. She bravely shone a light on her own darkness through her poetry, recognizing the power of gloom over her mind. One of the things that made Plath stand out was that she was a pioneer advocate of confessional poetry. One of the most stunning examples of Plath's ability to delve into universal feeling is found in her semi-autobiographical masterpiece, *The Bell Jar*. In its pages, she outlines her personal battle with depression and existential angst. Plath brought Esther Greenwood to life, and her story was a gorgeous tapestry weaved from the complexity of mental illness and the sorrow of grief. Her novels connected with readers of all ages and backgrounds because she drew from her own life. She will be appreciated for her candor in

revealing her own personal anguish in her work. Sylvia Plath's biography and struggle with mental disorders are central to her writing. She wrote about heavy topics including depression, social isolation, and restrictive gender norms. She wrote moving tales that illuminated the human condition by drawing on her own experiences and the transformational power of literature. Sylvia Plath's writings show how words may bring about change and illuminate the universal themes that unite all humans.

4.2 Unraveling the Feminine Identity

Esther's defiance of these norms is a powerful allegory for the ways in which women's lives were molded by the culture of the time. In her story, Esther faces a significant existential conundrum: how to balance her academic ambitions with the expectations of the people around her. The complex maze of female identity is expertly navigated by Plath's narration, which sheds light on the tense tension between conforming to expectations and following one's own passions. Plath's ingenuity lies in the way she uses her protagonist's journey to encourage introspection, critical examination of the restrictive roles assigned to women, and the pursuit of alternative paths to satisfaction.

4.3 Societal Expectations and Gender Roles

Sylvia Plath examines the damaging effects of gender norms on women's mental health in *The Bell Jar*, set in the 1950s. Esther's inner conflicts reflect women's challenges in today's patriarchal culture. Foregrounding the prevalent gender prejudice that governed women's life during the period, Plath shows how societal expectations may make women feel devalued and despondent (Goldensohn, 1978). The story explores the concept of conformity via Esther, who pretends to be happy only so she may pass as society's "ideal woman." Her mental distress and isolation stem

from her inability to share herself with the world. Readers find resonance in Plath's scathing assessment of the social constraints that limit women's goals, and the topic of gender equality and women's emancipation continues to spark debate. Plath shows how deeply patriarchal standards affect women's mental health by developing a sophisticated story that examines the connection between mental health and cultural expectations. The uphill battle Esther faces with her melancholy is a sobering reminder of the pressing need for a more accepting and empowered culture in which women may pursue their goals and express their unique personalities without fear of retribution.

Chapter 5: Comparing Plath's Works with Other Female Authors

5.1 Plath's Influence on Feminist Literature

Sylvia Plath has had a significant and far-reaching effect on feminist writing. She inspired a new generation of women writers to write about identity, mental health, and the female experience with unflinching honesty and depth in her unabashedly raw and emotionally charged works (Gubar, 2014). A feminist literary movement was sparked by Plath's unafraid questioning of society's standards and frank representation of feminine problems. Her books of poems and short stories are considered feminist classics, and *The Bell Jar* is often cited as an example of her groundbreaking prose. As it dealt openly with the complexity of mental health and cultural pressures on young women, this novel, in particular, broke the mold of standard coming-of-age narratives for women. Esther Greenwood, Plath's lead, has come to represent numerous women who have struggled with their sense of self and their ability to achieve their goals in light of cultural norms (Kaufman, 2010). Her poetry, often written in a personal tone, exposed women's struggles and provided a scathing critique of the male-dominated literary scene of her day. Plath is considered a feminist

literary pioneer for her groundbreaking exploration of forbidden issues, including despair, death, and female sexuality, via her confessional poems.

Additionally, Plath's works continued encouraging following generations of female authors to question patriarchal standards and embrace their individuality long after her death. Following in Plath's footsteps, contemporary writers like Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sharon Olds established a canon of feminist literature. Proof positive that women's voices can change the literary landscape and question cultural conventions, Plath's reputation as a pioneer in feminist writing lives on.

5.2 Recurring Themes and Common Motifs among Female Authors of Depressed Works

Numerous women writers throughout history have delved into depression in their works. Authors like Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Anne Sexton wrote about their struggles with mental illness, and their results reflect Plath's investigation of the subject. These authors are interested in exploring the complexity of female identity with the sensation of isolation and alienation. These authors, like Plath, typically used striking symbolism and introspective tales to convey their characters' anguish and complexity of mind. The novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf dives deep into the minds of its protagonist and antagonist, revealing their inner turmoil and the burden of societal norms. There are parallels between Esther Greenwood's path to self-discovery in *The Bell Jar* and Clarissa Dalloway's struggle with depression in *Mrs Dalloway*. The fundamental themes of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a classic short tale by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, are captivity, mental collapse, and stifling women's voices. Similar themes, including the oppressive consequences of patriarchal conventions on women's mental health, are at play in this novella and Plath's novel, which centers on the metaphorical bell jar. Anne Sexton's poetry, which

earned her the label of "contemporary confessional poet," explored mental illness, suicide, and the construction of femininity. "Live or Die," like Plath's poetry, explores sorrow and inner turmoil.

5.3 Echoes of Plath's Impact: The Unveiling of Her Legacy

Plath defied expectations as a pioneer by writing about her own experiences with mental pain, so addressing the current taboo around mental health concerns. This audacious step cleared the path for more open discussions about mental health, and its influence extended well beyond the page. There was a seismic shift in the realm of mental health development and awareness. Readers found peace in Plath's transparency about her unhappiness and the shadows of suicide ideation, and her work helped them get a greater awareness of mental health difficulties. As a result, views regarding Sylvia Plath left a collection of work that exemplifies the power of words to change the world. Her tireless campaign for mental health awareness and acceptance ushered in a new era of openness and dialogue that is still going on today. Her unparalleled power acts as a rallying cry, demonstrating how words can shift attitudes and pave the way for more compassion, awareness, and change. Overall, Sylvia Plath made an indelible impression on literature through her courageous exploration of grief and its deep link to feminine identity, as well as her significant influence on feminist writing. Her writing launched a movement, motivating subsequent generations of female authors to establish their own voices and question long-held standards. Seeking support shifted dramatically, breaking earlier barriers (Corrigan, 2014). Plath's influence as an early proponent of feminist fiction and an advocate for mental health awareness continues to resound strongly with modern readers and authors. Her ideas are still relevant today, inspiring debate and shaping the future of thought.

Chapter 6: Psychological Analysis of Plath's Characters

6.1 Psychological Profile of the Protagonists in Her Works

Sylvia Plath's works are infused with multifaceted characters whose nuances provide insight into the human psyche. Esther Greenwood, the female lead of *The Bell Jar*, goes through a personal development reflecting Plath's own mental illness experiences. Esther's characterization captures the complexities of despair and the struggle to find one's identity in the face of societal expectations. Through Plath's detailed evocation of Esther's inner life, we gain insight into the mind of a young lady struggling with feelings of isolation. The depressive symptoms of acute estrangement and existential crises characterize Esther's mental makeup (Gardner, 2014). Her mental health declines over time as she struggles to fulfill the gendered duties society has assigned her, maintain high academic standards, and navigate the complexity of love relationships. Reflecting the tumultuous feelings and cognitive difficulties that sometimes accompany mental illness, Plath creates a figure whose outlook alternates between optimism and despair. When reading Plath's poetry, it will meet a cast of characters that reflects different sides of her personality. Plath's troubled connection with her father's memory is reflected in the poem "Daddy," in which the speaker struggles with unresolved emotions towards her father after he has passed away. This poem's psychological depth delves into feelings of loss, rage, and the need for resolution, providing a touching window into the inner turmoil that often informs artistic endeavors.

Like in "Lady Lazarus," the theatricality and defiance of the speaker in the face of death reveal an inner struggle between hopelessness and the need for rebirth. Inviting readers to delve into the depths of the human experience via her poetic lens, Plath's ability to create characters who

represent different emotional states is on full display in this persona-driven investigation of the mind.

6.2 Understanding the Human Psyche through Literature

Literature, as a potent form of expression, is a one-of-a-kind resource for delving into the complexities of the human mind. Sylvia Plath's writings illustrate this strength since she deftly combines language, symbolism, and characterization to explore the human psyche. Plath gives readers an unvarnished look into the intricacies of the human condition through her portrayal of people like Esther Greenwood, personalities in her poems, and other individuals in her writing. By entering these people's heads, they are forced to deal with common feelings and experiences may recognize from our lives (Milner, 2001). By opening up about her mental health challenges, Plath inspires her readers to be more understanding of others with mental illness and reject the stigma surrounding it.

Moreover, literature allows people to explore feelings and ideas safely they find difficult to articulate in other contexts. Plath uses metaphor, imagery, and emotive language to make her readers confront and think deeply about brutal realities. Reading literature by Plath or another author may provide a cathartic release and help repair shattered hearts. Literature also serves as a mirror, reflecting the reader's life and experiences in all their nuanced complexity. Her characters' struggles, desires, and aspirations are all relatable to the reader, making Plath's works a striking reflection of the human psyche. Literature may aid in self-understanding by prompting introspection on the reader's experiences.

6.3 Mental Health Representation in Fictional Characters

Sylvia Plath broke new ground in her representation of people with mental health concerns because she did not gloss over the complexity of their situations. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood and

others like her provide a human face to the sadness and mental illness that Plath explores. A figure like Esther, who depicts the internal battles preceding mental health difficulties, might help shed light on the solitary nature of depression and the impact of societal demands on one's emotional well-being. Esther's mental health issues are made more relatable by Plath's honest portrayal of her inner thoughts and feelings, which also helps to endear the reader to the protagonist. Plath's fictitious characters let her explore the inner workings of the human psyche and heart. Characters in her poems display a wide range of human experiences, from complete despair and self-destruction to resoluteness and personal development. Plath's use of various poetic personas facilitates her ability to convey the complexity of mental health, which she sees as a spectrum rather than a singular experience. The dedication with which Plath depicts her characters' mental health difficulties helps to normalize the discussion of mental illness. By addressing issues related to mental health in her writings, Plath encourages her readers to examine their own biases and show more compassion towards individuals experiencing mental health difficulties.

Finally, Sylvia Plath's insightful depictions of human psychology are evidence of her mastery of the subject. From the multifaceted Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar* to the numerous people she depicts in her poetry, Plath weaves a realistic tapestry of the human condition. She provides an accurate and empathetic insight into the complexities of the human condition via the experiences of her fictional characters with mental illness and the subjects she addresses in her work. Plath's writings encourage reflection and help develop the reader's capacity for empathy.

Chapter 7: The Healing Power of Art on the Mind

7.1 Plath's Use of Creativity as a Defense against Trauma

Art as a vehicle for self-discovery and recovery may be seen in Plath's frank exploration of her mental health difficulties in her literary works (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). She composed strong poetry because she was ready to be open and write about what she feared, what wounded her, and what she desired. She was freed from the burden of concealment by writing in a confessional manner, which forced her to face her problems head-on. Like other works by Plath, *The Bell Jar* allowed her to explore her mind. Plath's struggles with depression are reflected in the novel's protagonist, Esther Greenwood. Plath's path of introspection and self-discovery included the creation of a protagonist who struggled with comparable issues. Plath could make sense of her troubles and ultimately overcome them through the alchemy of design, to the cathartic effect of Esther's story.

7.2 The Restorative Potential of Artistic Expression

Many people throughout history, including Plath, have sought solace in their artistic endeavors as a means of catharsis. Expressing oneself creatively via writing, painting, music, or dancing may be a cathartic and illuminating experience. Individuals can obtain perspective and clarity on their feelings via creating as they release their inner conflicts into the world. In a non-threatening and accepting environment, one may face one's innermost ideas and emotions via the creative process (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Putting one's emotional turmoil on paper helps process those feelings and provides a sense of agency and control over one's story. Individuals can recover their voice and sense of self via the cathartic release from creative expression. In addition, people with creative outlets can communicate feelings that may be difficult to put into words. Art gives people like Plath, who struggle with mental health, a safe space to express themselves without worrying about

being misunderstood. A state of flow, in which one loses track of time and is wholly absorbed in an activity, can also be achieved through artistic pursuits. In addition to alleviating stress and anxiety, being in a state of flow also increases motivation and satisfaction with life. Writing let Plath achieve a state of intense concentration and focus, which gave her a break from the turbulent emotions that accompanied her sadness.

7.3 How Mental Health Affects Creativity

Numerous studies and investigations have examined the connection between psychological well-being and inventiveness. Considerable research has revealed a complicated and nuanced link between mental illness and creativity, but no conclusive solution has been reached. It has been said that the unusual thinking and fresh outlook on life that sometimes accompany mental illness boost creative output (Pollitt, 2012). It's possible that Plath's despair gave her access to the raw emotions that pervade her works and allowed her to dive deeply into the human mind. Possible emotional depth and sensitivity in her work resulted from her struggles with mental health. It is important to remember that not all artists have mental illnesses and that creativity is not limited to those with it. Many creative people live happy, healthy lives because they derive meaning and satisfaction from their work. The connection between one's mental health and their ability to be creative is still nuanced and distinct. Some people find comfort and healing in the arts; others use them to work through difficult emotions or share their stories of coping with mental health issues with a broader audience. Finally, Sylvia Plath's life and writings demonstrate how art may serve as a therapeutic outlet for mental health issues. In both her poetry and *The Bell Jar*, Plath showed the curative potential of creative expression by exploring her inner world and releasing pent-up emotions via the medium of writing (Plath, 1963). Insights into the human brain and various coping mechanisms are provided by exploring the link between mental health and creativity, which remains

complicated and multidimensional. Plath left behind a legacy that continues to inspire readers and artists today because she used art to explore, heal, and remake her inner world.

Chapter 8: The Influence of Plath's Works on Modern Discourse

8.1 Contemporary Interpretations of Plath's Literature

Sylvia Plath's writings continue to significantly impact current dialogues because of how they might be interpreted and the questions they raise. Plath's concerns with mental health, gender identity, and societal expectations have not lost their significance for readers and critics in the twenty-first century. Confessional poetry and other forms of honest self-expression have recently seen a renaissance. New generations of poets have been influenced by Plath's confessional approach, which paved the way for this literary trend to write very personal and profoundly moving poetry (Root-Bernstein, 2013). Contemporary poets like Rupi Kaur, Warsan Shire, and Ocean Vuong, who address trauma, identity, and resilience in their works, show the influence of Plath's confessional poetry. Furthermore, Plath's examination of female identity and the challenges of women in a patriarchal society has received new attention in the 21st century because of the feminist movement. Since Plath's time, conversations on gender equality and the need for various and inclusive voices in writing have flourished in response to her desire to defy societal norms and emBRACe her complexity.

8.2 Plath's Impact on Mental Health Advocacy

The advocacy for mental health in the twenty-first century has been greatly influenced by Plath's frank depiction of mental health problems. Her openness about her battles with depression and suicide ideation shook up the debate around mental health and made room for more transparency and compassion. By writing about her own struggles with depression and other mental health issues, Plath enabled her readers to go past the stigmatizing term "mental illness" and connect with

the universal feelings and experiences beneath. Her portrayal of mental health problems as inherent to being human has aided in breaking down stigmas associated with mental illness and increasing awareness and compassion (Sexton, 1966). Awareness and support for mental health measures have increased since Plath began advocating for them. Her unflinching depiction of mental health issues has motivated communities and people to emphasize prevention, treatment, and recovery. The lessons found in Plath's works serve as a potent reminder of how crucial it is to discuss mental health with compassion and respect, even as the need for doing so intensifies.

8.3 Relevance of Her Works in the 21st Century

Sylvia Plath's writings from the middle of A Classic, evergreen look at the toll mental illness has on one's sense of self and position in the world, "*The Bell Jar* is Plath's picture of sorrow. At a time when our culture battles with growing rates of depression and anxiety, Esther Greenwood's tale is a crucial reminder of the importance of empathy and understanding in the conversation of mental health. Women in the twenty-first century are still fighting against rigid gender roles, the burden of cultural expectations, and the struggle for independence and agency. Plath's meticulous examination of these themes mirrors a long-lasting assessment of engrained patriarchal conventions, conveying an impassioned appeal for gender equality and women's emancipation (Steinberg, 1992).

It is astonishing how relevant the effects of the 20th century are even now. Stories about battling mental health issues, societal pressures, and the search for self-discovery appeal to an ageless audience. *The Bell Jar's* bleakness serves as a permanent reminder of the long-term damage that mental illness can cause to a person's sense of self and position in the world, making it an enduring work of literature. Esther Greenwood's story serves as an important reminder of the necessity of

empathy and understanding in talks about mental health as our society battles with increased rates of melancholy and anxiety.

Plath's tales of mid-century gender conflict have startling resonance outside of the realm of mental health. In the twenty-first century, women have continued to push back against rigid gender norms, the burden of social mandates, and the relentless search for autonomy and independence. Plath's incisive critique of patriarchal standards and, more importantly, her passionate siren appeal for gender equality and women's emancipation are etched into these complex narratives (Steinberg, 1992). Ultimately, Plath's literary discourse not only survives but flourishes because her characters' troubles resonate so strongly with the lived realities of modern people. Her writings continue to serve as an inspiration for people today, shaping how we talk about issues like sexism, mental illness, and finding one's true identity.

Sylvia Plath's writings remain very influential on contemporary thought. Her forthright examination of mental health issues has aided in the destigmatization of mental illness and the promotion of mental health activism, while her confessional approach has sparked a renaissance in personal narrative and poetry. Plath's writings are still essential today because they provide profound insights into the human condition, tackle the complexity of mental health, and discuss persistent gender issues. Sylvia Plath will continue to profoundly affect literature and culture as long as people read her deep and emotionally charged writings.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The influence of mental illness and feminine despair on Sylvia Plath's writing has been explored in depth in this thesis. This research, via an in-depth examination of Plath's main poems and prose and her challenges and life, has shown the complex connection between her inner upheaval and her creative expression (Showalter, 1972). It looked at Plath's life and the impact her mental health

issues had on her writing. Plath's poetry and prose often reflect her lifelong struggle with depression. Her investigations of gender roles, expectations of women in society, and other restraints on women in the middle of the twentieth century drew heavily from her own experiences (Wagner-Martin, 1992).

Plath's poetry was dissected above, emphasizing the main works that revealed her inner struggle. Vivid symbolism and emotive imagery centered on central themes of solitude, misery, and suicide ideation. We discussed how her poetry told her inner turmoil and accurately depicted the intricacies of the human mind. In this paper it also discussed Plath's treatment of female despair in her writing, focusing on *The Bell Jar*. The work was an emotional exploration of pain, a dissection of femininity, and a critique of gender norms and expectations. Plath's depiction of Esther Greenwood's struggle with depression resounded as a poignant testament to women's difficulties in a male-dominated society. Plath's effect on feminist writing shared themes among depressed female authors, and their enduring impact were all discussed in writing, a comparison of her works to those of other female authors (Brain, 2018). A new generation of confessional poetry and solid female voices emerged in response to Plath's unafraid examination of the self, mental illness, and societal expectations. It analysed Plath's characters psychologically, probing into their inner workings to see how the author herself used art as therapy. Plath gave her readers a deep look into the human mind through her characters, eliciting sympathy and compassion. The importance of art as a catharsis for mental health was explored in this paper, with Plath's writings serving as an example. We spoke about how artistic pursuits may be therapeutic since they allow for introspection, growth, and the release of pent-up emotions. In the Influence of Plath's Works on Modern Discourse, we looked at how her writing has been interpreted in the modern era, how she has affected the mental health advocacy field, and how her themes continue to resonate today. New

generations of readers and intellectuals continue to be influenced by Plath's works, proving the lasting value of her literary and intellectual achievements and her advocacy for mental health awareness.

Several vital advances in literary criticism and the discussion of mental health may be found in this thesis. Our in-depth analysis of Sylvia Plath's writings sheds new light on her creative output and how it reflects both her own mental health difficulties and the larger cultural milieu in which she lived. The universality of the human feelings and experiences revealed by studying Plath's poetry and prose is particularly striking. In addition, the study highlights how Plath's stories and ideas continue to resonate with modern audiences. Plath's writings resonate with readers because they raise awareness of mental illness, gender inequality, and other pressing social concerns. The report does have its caveats, however. Although we have made every effort to present a thorough study of Plath's works, different viewpoints and interpretations may need investigation. Some parts of Plath's life and writings can also remain mysterious due to the need for secondary sources and historical context.

The results of this investigation suggest several potential directions for further study. Art and emotional health are two areas that may benefit from further exploration, so this is an encouraging trend. More investigation is warranted into the lives and works of other confessional poets who also had a mental illness. Further research should look into how Plath's writings have influenced modern literature, feminist theory, and the promotion of positive mental health. Researchers may learn a great deal about the lasting power of art as a catalyst for transformation and self-discovery by examining how her themes and tales continue to impact current literature and social movements. Seeing how readers of different backgrounds respond to Plath's works might illuminate her ideas' universality (Woolf, 1925). If it wants to know how effectively Plath's works foster understanding

and empathy, it should look into how they are used in mental health education and awareness efforts. In conclusion, Sylvia Plath's writings are an ever-relevant examination of the mind, women's roles in society, and the intricacies of the human condition. This thesis has presented a thorough evaluation of her writings, illuminating the pervasiveness of her ideas and their influence on contemporary debate. As a pioneer in writing and mental health awareness, Plath inspires readers and activists for the cause even now. Plath's legacy exemplifies how art may inspire compassion, introspection, and societal transformation as we go into the future.

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