

Against the world – the identity of the main character in “The Bell Jar” by Sylvia Plath

Rec.: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, London 2011, Faber & Faber, ss. 240.

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Abstract

The article analyzing the identity crisis as a personal creation that is illustrated throughout Sylvia Plath's the only one novel. The meaning of identity refers to people's existence in the world. It contains both sides of the view about a main character *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath: her self consciousness and the outside world expectations.

Judith Kroll in her book *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* claims that this author “absorbs autobiographical or confessional details into some of her poetry and prose”¹. Teresa De Lauretis in her article *Rebirth in The Bell Jar* names the only one novel by Plath autobiographical². Indeed, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, contains plenty of autobiographical elements – the main character like Plath struggle with herself and the world, but such an interpretation as the only possible one would be an oversimplification. Meanwhile, it is obvious that the plot of the novel is not only a story about adventures and struggles of the main character. Interpretation is a more complex process. It is the way in which the story is explained or understood. Moreover, the reader definitely

¹ J. Kroll, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Cheltenham 2008, p. 148.

² Zob. T. De Lauretis, *Rebirth in The Bell*, [in:] <https://www.scribd.com/document/617624590/00497878-1976-9978385> (dostęp 19 XII 2025).

should take the structure into the whole of the story into consideration. None of the elements exist here by chance. Esther Greenwood, who is the main character, is the most important element that connects all pieces of the novel. Her story can be compared with Sylvia Plath's life to some extent. However it must be remembered that *The Bell Jar* is not a document but the description of the reality in an artistic way.

Esther Greenwood is used in this novel to express the problem of the identity crisis. Silvianna Blosser in the book *A Poetics on Edge* claims that "[...] Sylvia Plath's prose subtly pushes the reader into seeing the poet as a woman on the edge, whose imagination and creativity were immobilized and killed by the blunt fact because she was unable to see things differently"³. The way Esther Greenwood is created corresponds with showing this issue. That is why the main character is introduced in the story in a manner that it explains the crisis of identity in Sylvia Plath's writing. The whole tale of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath is told in the first – person narration, which allows Esther Greenwood's character to illustrate the contemporary time with her words. The main character shows the world around her through her feelings and opinions. Each of the events, people and their activities are distorted by her own assessment. This way of describing shows the range of identity crisis that is visible throughout the novel. All the elements that create the story in this novel build a narrow, unfriendly space when Esther Greenwood introduces herself as a person who lives in a world that is hard for her to bear.

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about it in the papers – goggle – eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut – smelling mouth of every subway⁴.

The narrator, Esther, illustrates the world by using this kind of artistic expressions (as the animation) that show the external environment as an autonomous space. The passage mentioned above contains attributes that personify the world around her. The area is described in the way that makes it similar to a living organism. Esther Greenwood is pursued by the headlines of papers that stare at her from each corner in the street, the subways give off strange smell. Summer is full of "sultry days, the sizzling weather"⁵ seems to cover Esther's body and makes her tired. This picture recalls a prison or a trap for her. The theme of personification is presented throughout the whole

³ S. Blosser, *A Poetics on Edge: The Poetry and Prose of Sylvia Plath*, Oxford 2001, p. 199.

⁴ S. Plath, *The Bell Jar*, London 2011, p. 7.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 6.

novel. It was used by the author of *The Bell Jar* to describe the main character's emotions more carefully and precisely. On the other hand, if the feelings are not named directly, the readers would not be moved or connected to the emotional aspect of the story. This narration contains additional information about Esther who as the first – person narrator is concerned with herself. Generally this kind of narration makes the story about both herself and others who get entangled in the same situations. Sylvia Plath uses the description of the relationship with other characters to explain the features, attitudes, successes and Esther's failure. Through the narration develops the identity of the main character. But the identity cannot be understood as a set of features that are stable. It is rather a story about the fickleness of Esther's fate.

The first – person narration in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath builds the background of Esther's actions. Moreover, the narration directly describes the understanding of the world through the main character and shows her motivation, as well. The reader can observe her way from desire to trying to succeed in life. For example Esther Greenwood dreams of being a writer so she sends her short stories to literary magazines. Her actions, thoughts and emotions are subordinate to those she wants to achieve. Additionally they create the story in the novel. As Terasa De Lauretis claims, "Esther's words sound as familiar as the echo of our own voices, as Plath's private vision has become today's public awareness"⁶. The main character of *The Bell Jar* tries to find the sense of her life among the actions that are around her. She is presented as a person who has specific intents and values. Furthermore, the story is still concentrated on her mental and emotional state. This order of putting the elements of the novel has a great influence on building the identity of the main character as well. Esther Greenwood is illustrated as a person who understands herself, has her own goals and is terrified of failure. All her emotions and actions are subordinate to these points.

I think I should tell you right away – she said, and I could see dab news in the set of her neck – you didn't make that writing course.
The air punched out of my stomach. [...]
Then my mouth shaped itself sourly. I had expected it⁷.

This manner of narration refers to this meaning of identity that implies "a symptom of mine that simply assumed everybody else had also – although there is, of course, something to that too"⁸. The main character is put amongst other people whose lives are in harmony with social rules. Esther Greenwood

⁶ T. De Lauretis, *Rebirth in The Bell*, op. cit.

⁷ S. Plath, *The Bell Jar*, op. cit., p. 93.

⁸ E.H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Circle*, New York 1994, p. 18.

tries to find her own place in this reality. She wants to start steering her own life. She is fully aware of how the world applies the same rules to everybody but simultaneously she does not want to be treated in the same way. This young woman has her own ideas of how to live, the single thing that she needs is the possibility to pursue her own goals. Unfortunately, this is hard for her to do.

The picture of the outer world is distorted by Esther Greenwood's emotions throughout the course of the entire novel. She always empathizes with main character's feelings, especially in how she comments and assesses the events and people around her. Even if she compares her own existence to those around her, the reader still gets access to her emotions. By the way she describes herself the reader sees Esther is building her own identity and shows how she makes relationships and finds knowledge on her own. The first – person narration gives Esther's point of view to the readers. This manner of viewing her literary reality underlines the dissociation of Esther Greenwood's outer and inner worlds. The crisis of identity is indirectly shown through the book, as it illustrates the manner of talking about the outside world. It is obvious that this description is subjective, although the story presents a great influence on the readers' knowledge about reality. The reader is aware of the surrounding culture that Esther grows up in and that she is thrown inside the world that does not understand her. Every person who the woman meets limits the distance between them. They have a conversation with her as a mother, a doctor or a manager. They never want to get to know Esther and her way of interpreting reality. They seem to know what is best for her and what will make her happy. Because of the first person narration the reader is aware that they can also be easily manipulated. This way of showing the contemporary time is distorted by Esther's point of view. This manner of narration causes the reader to find out more about Esther's contemporary reality and simultaneously about the way of getting to know her world through the main character.

The internal conflict of the outside world and her inner feelings is the primal problem of the novel by Sylvia Plath. Steven Gould Axelrod in his book *Sylvia Plath The Wound and the Cure of Words* claims that the writer "sensed that the artistic mirror could reflect her divided being [...] She conceived of the mirror itself as a double figure"⁹. The main character talks about the outside world that she lives in but this is her own interpretation. This technique is used in *The Bell Jar* through the manner of narration that is full of emotions. Sylvia Plath's literature is a practical application to show the dual

⁹ S. Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath The Wound and the Cure of Words*, [in:] https://openlibrary.org/books/OL17781263M/Sylvia_Plath (dostęp 15 XII 2025).

existence of an individual. One part contains Esther's own inner experiences and the other one includes opinions of others. The first one illustrates her emotions but next refers to her body or gender and how it can be her own prison. Teresa De Laurentis in her article *Rebirth in The Bell Jar* says that the only novel by Sylvia Plath "... is the account of a journey, of Esther's descent into the hell of self – disintegration, her rebirth, and ascent to self-unity and freedom"¹⁰. The main character is placed between these spaces. She is aware of this duality so she tries to find the best resolution that can reconcile her desires and dreams with outside social situations.

The understanding of the world's duality is multileveled. Firstly, the prepared stories are given through a culturalistic perspective that decides of their level of importance. The young, 19-year-old intelligent girl from Boston creates her own life story amongst another. Next to this unitary existence there are universal and general (refers to love, family bound or friendship) themes. The interpersonal conversations explain the world's duality. Esther jots down the behavior of the people around her and assesses them. It does not mean that she rejects them as beneath her. The main character is just trying to find the space that allows her to pursue her dreams and desires. Unfortunately, this attitude needs to play roles during the cooperative situations that interact with another person.

The two of them didn't even stop jitterbugging during the intervals. I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine paneling. I felt like a hole in the ground¹¹.

Esther Greenwood seems to be a vulnerable, clumsy person who was thrown into the world without previous social development. She strongly disagrees with the reality that she has to live in. She is aware of absurdity which comes from the gender, roles, culture or/ and religion's influences. Esther knows that the world is ready to offer her a set of possibilities to organize her own life. Unfortunately, the world around her does not agree with her dreams and plans. This recognition is a key problem represented in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The main character appears in the first sentence of the novel, where the reader first discover what she is thinking about. This invites the reader to underline the parts of reality that is the most important for her. The events are selected very carefully as to give a subjective picture of the contemporary world. On the other hand, this selection also shows Esther Greenwood as a sensitive person. The readers find out what kind of situations capture her attention and how much they pierce her life and what

¹⁰ T. De Lauretis, *Rebirth in The Bell*, op. cit.

¹¹ S. Plath, *The Bell Jar*, op. cit., p. 14.

guide her perception. The beginning of the novel is intertwined with two elements together – the news about electrocution of the Rosenbergs and information about the sunny, hot weather in New York. At first sight, it is a strange connection – death and weather, but when inspected closely the linking surprises us. The perception of actual events is often parallel with Esther's experience. All facts (important and banal) make her reality personal. The manner of talking about the reality is the result of the obsessive focus on her emotions. But simultaneously it illustrates herself by indirectly manner. Plath uses symbolic pictures to show how the title bell jar distorts her contact with the outside world. Death symbolizes her fear of the various kinds of bonds, possibilities, and plans she has, and how scared she is to fail. The hot weather evokes a picture of the world that charges her imagination and the range of upsetting events around her. Reality shows an aggressive space which consumes others or destroys them, like the Rosenbergs. The world is devoid of the ability to rescue, understand or protect anyone. This is a space that attacks the main character through information, pictures of cadavers, that will not stop haunting her. The facts and events, as well as behaviors and emotions of the young girl's from Boston, are key elements of the literary reality. Moreover, it is a combination of common and terrible things that are interlaced and create a special space that the woman exists. In addition the readers can follow the journey as her attitude changes drastically.

Esther Greenwood does not want to exist as the only element amongst plenty. She is aware that her life cannot be repeated and that her presence on the Earth is an unrepeatable chance. This situation illustrates the next aspect of the identity crisis in *The Bell Jar*. The young girl from Boston makes her reflect on her own existence. She is as an observer who tries to find sense in the events around her. Esther goes all out to kill herself. She does not want to regret her decision, but on the other hand, she meets a lot of confines that destroys her dreams. Additionally the main character's knowledge about the environment is not a record as a clear emotional entity. The various interaction with society has resulted in a great influence on her. It gives an individual notation on Esther's cultural knowledge. She cannot make a choice because she is limited by gender and societies which are primarily patriarchal. Esther Greenwood wants to be strong and independent like men but it does not change the fact that she is still in a lower position. There is prepared clear objective that she is suppose to choose. Unfortunately, this offer does not agree with her desires. It is impossible to achieve dreams for Esther. Her role is limited to beautiful appearance, nice behavior and attending exhausting less clever meetings. Moreover she feels the weight of responsibility found in being female, especially the intimate contacts with men that are hard for her.

She has full confidence that women are the persons who should care for their purity. In Addition to it the division of responsibility is unequal both as it relates to pay and the penalty for intimate occasions and further social opinion.

What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb [...]. A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line¹².

The awareness of such a world order can be hard to accept and can destroy her. The philosopher, Martin Heidegger, argues that people cannot be outside of the world because they are already inside it and they always absorb its rules. Esther Greenwood's situation resembles this state of thinking. She wants to be free, outside of social conditioning but it seems impossible. The readers can suspect that the dreams of this young, 19-year-old girl from Boston to be free are an illusion. They are destroyed by reality.

The doubleness is an important feature of the main character's creation. This division is noticed in Esther's intention, attitude and emotion, so it influences the way of knowing herself in specific situations. At the beginning of *The Bell Jar* the main character observes and comments on the common behaviors around her. Then, when she comes back home and faces the rules that apply to the world, notices that these behaviors are rather a repeatable scheme. She can be somebody's wife, learn shorthand – typing or starts travelling. She realizes that she should probably choose one of them. However, the awareness that this choice probably will not be able to change block her.

I would find words to tell him how I was so scared, as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out. [...] why everything people did seemed so silly, because they only died in the end¹³.

Esther's attitude and emotions directly come from the awareness of her helplessness. The description of this specific situation is a great illustration of the way of Esther understands herself. She tries to find her own place where she can steer her life. However, this world is unclear and chaotic for her. That is why the young woman cannot organize her emotional experiences connectedly. She understands that her desires are in danger but she is too weak to protect them. Her weakness troubles her with the realization of herself. It generally creates a dangerous conflict within her identity. The young woman cannot carry out her dreams. She is not stable and strong on reversal. All, even narrow defeat, make her deeply upset and disturb her future choices. When Esther Greenwood encounters the next obstacle she does not take ac-

¹² S. Plath, *The Bell Jar*, op. cit., p. 181.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 105.

tion but rather closes up and turns away from her life plans. Steven Gould Axelrod in his book *Sylvia Plath the Wound and the Cure of Words*, gives the information that Sylvia Plath “as a young girl thought of herself as a potential double of Alice”¹⁴. The main character of *The Bell Jar* seems to further this belief. Esther Greenwood observes how she and her world are reflected inside the mirror. Until she does not have to face the world she can be observer who is excited by her sense experience. The moment that she must experience the reality and feel the force of world’s indifference is too hard for her. This moment results in a breakthrough in Esther’s life, but unfortunately it has a tragic consequence. The ending of the novel by Sylvia Plath is open. The reader does not know the future of the main character. Like Steven Gould Axelrod claimed that “writing

the specular “I” rather than the social “I” could well express her sense of doubleness because so much of her hidden self centered on the issue of creativity”¹⁵. The manner of building the main character is unusually consistent. Esther Greenwood, down to the last detail, underlines the division into both outside and inside spaces that create her identity and her life.

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¹⁴ S. Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath the Wound and the Cure of Words*, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibidem.