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EN40SL

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Ms. Smith

### Outside Influences on Esther Greenwood During Her Journey Through Self Doubt

"Consider this: nothing would be the same if you did not exist." (David Niven). *The Bell Jar* is a novel about a woman, Esther Greenwood, and her battle with mental illness. Many people come into and out of Esther's life during this fight, and each person has a different influence on her. Throughout *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath explores the influence of other people on Esther during her battle, and how it determined the overall outcome of Esther's story. Esther has both bad days and good days, and everybody around her affects that. Throughout the novel Plath acknowledges that all of the people in Esther's life change how she is developing and recovering. Mrs. Greenwood, Esther's mother, and Joan Gilling are two characters who have a very serious impact on Esther and how she develops.

Mrs. Greenwood is never supportive of Esther's future as a writer, which contributes to her lack of success (Deitermann). Mrs. Greenwood repeatedly shows her lack of faith in Esther and her ability to find a job after college as only a "plain English major" (Plath 76). This lack of faith is further enforced when Esther does not make it into the writing program that she was looking forward to when returning from New York. Mrs. Greenwood shows her insensitivity to the matter when she breaks the news to Esther, saying "I think I should tell you right away [...] you didn't make that writing course." (Plath 121). She gives Esther this news right after Esther gets off of her flight from New York, showing how unsympathetic she is towards the bad news and how this will continue to affect Esther's literary aspirations (Almaguer). Directly following the receipt of this news, Esther reaches her lowest point, and

it is essentially Mrs. Greenwood that was the catalyst. She starts to believe that she has nothing to look forward to (Plath 124), and because of this she begins to refuse to follow through with her necessary daily life tasks such as getting dressed (Plath 128), sleeping, reading (Plath 133), and washing herself (Plath 134). Most importantly, she stops making life choices for herself. She allows her mother to begin teaching her shorthand, something Mrs. Greenwood has always wanted to do, and something Esther has never wanted before. Mrs. Greenwood assures her it will be practical for her to learn (Plath 129), which suggests that she believes her daughter's writing is impractical. As Esther's story and illness progress, Mrs. Greenwood is not supportive of Esther emotionally either.

Mrs. Greenwood does not have a clear understanding of how mental illness works, and this causes her to push Esther to be normal, which leads Esther to become further estranged. After Esther's first electroshock therapy session, Esther wishes to be taken out of treatment. Her mother supports this decision telling Esther "I knew you'd decide to be alright again." (Plath 154). However, many experts agree that an individual's mental health is not a choice, just as one's physical health is not. One cannot simply choose to make their pancreas work well, as much as one cannot choose to make their brain work properly (Tracy). The fact that her mother does not have this understanding exemplifies how little support Esther is actually able to receive from her support system. Esther's doctor, Doctor Nolan, from the private hospital that Esther ends up at, understands this lack of a connection. This is shown when she acknowledges Esther's feelings towards her mother and makes the decision that Esther would be better off without any visitors, including her mother (Plath 212-214). She also acknowledges this factor when deciding to keep Esther at the hospital instead of sending her home to stay with her mother before returning to college (Plath 236-237). Not allowing Esther to go home where she would be surrounded once again by only her mother's influence, supports the idea that Mrs. Greenwood has a very negative impact on Esther and her mental health. Her attitude towards Esther forces Esther to consider her mental illness as something that she had done to her mother (Plath 250), instead of

focusing on becoming healthy one again. Overall, Esther's mother embodies many characteristics that Esther wants nothing to do with.

Mrs. Greenwood is not a feminist, as Esther is, which puts a strain on not only their relationship but also on Esther personally. The differences between her mother and herself create more choices for Esther to make. Choices about her career, her sex life, marriage, and even suicide. However, choice is something that the reader sees Esther truly struggle with as the novel progresses, another example of the negative effect Mrs. Greenwood has on her daughter at this point in Esther's life. Mrs. Greenwood is the person who sends Esther the Article 'In Defense of Chemistry' from the *Reader's Digest*. The article is on the topic of premarital sex and Esther quotes her mother as saying that "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." (Plath 85). Esther has a problem with the article because not only does it tell her what she has to do as a woman, but also because the article was inconsiderate as to how a woman might feel (Plath 86). Esther didn't like the idea that the world was so blatantly unfair between men and women, she desired things to be equal and fair between her husband and herself should she choose to marry (Plath 86). Her mother sent her this article to encourage her to maintain abstinence, but it only served to push her in the other direction. Esther does not believe as her mother does, she wishes to be equal. Meanwhile, she sees her mother as "someone who sacrificed her will for her husband's career" (Almaguer). Her mother is not someone that she respect because of this, and it affects her relationships with other prominent women in Esther's life, as well as contributes more to her downward spiral into mental illness. She stays with her mother upon her return from New York, and their difference in opinion puts a strain on Esther while she stays there. Their differences are what change Esther, however she is also impacted by spending time with someone who is very similar to Esther.

Joan is a character from Esther's life before her mental illness begins to take over entirely, and Joan's reappearance decides an important change in Esther's recovery. Both Joan and Esther attend

prestigious women's colleges, and both are very intelligent and successful in their fields (Almaguer). Both women tend to past affections for Buddy Willard, and both women struggle with suicidal thoughts. The contrast between the two however, is their recoveries. When Esther first discovers Joan at the private hospital, she makes a statement about how Joan already seems alright again, "'I guess so,' she said. 'Aren't you?'" (Plath 211). This causes Esther to question her progress, because she still has yet to feel like herself again. A little while later, after discovering she would be transferred to Belsize where the healthier patients stay, she refers to Joan as "marking the gulf between me and the nearly well ones" (Plath 215). Joan becomes a way for her to track her success and recovery. This allows Esther to somewhat acknowledge that she is in fact recovering. Though Esther refers to Joan as "a double of my old best self, specifically designed to follow and torment me." (Plath 216), Joan turns into a marker of what Esther could become, and someone who Esther trusts enough to turn to when she discovers she is hemorrhaging (Plath 243). Somewhere along the journey of fluctuating mental health, Esther decides that Joan is someone she can trust, which she was unable to do previously in the novel with friends such as Doreen (Plath 24). The similarities between Joan and Esther, as well as Joan's ever-changing health, cause Esther confusion, but also push her to new points in her own recovery.

It is with Joan's final act, her act of suicide, that the reader sees how stable Esther has become. She attends Joan's funeral because Joan's mother asks her to (Plath 255). This act shows how capable Esther has become of understanding and respecting the way that other people are feeling. Doctor Nolan gives her the option to stay at the hospital, telling her that she does not have to go if she does not feel up to it (Plath 255), but Esther agrees to go, something that pre-treatment Esther would not have done. She has become willing to put herself in public situations, knowing that she will get nothing from it. The funeral also allows Esther to find closure with death. She says, "all during the simple funeral service, I wondered what I thought I was burying." (Plath 255) which is important. Esther never attended a funeral for her father, her mother would not allow her to (Plath 174). Going to Joan's funeral allowed Esther to

bury and find closure with not only Joan, but her father, and her romanticized idea of death itself. It became clear to her that death was not anything pleasant or poetic, but "a black, six-foot-deep gap hacked in the hard ground." (Plath 256). It is after Joan's death, the loss of someone from her healthy past, as well as a central piece of her unhealthy present, that Esther seems to fully recover. Some critics link Joan's death directly with Esther's rebirth (Almaguer). The reader never learns if Esther leaves the hospital or not, but it is clear that she is in a healthier state of mind for as she walks into the room full of people waiting to judge her, she talks about being guided forward (Plath 257). Not only has she dealt with her friend's passing, she is now moving forward with her life.

Joan and Mrs. Greenwood play different roles in Esther's life, but they both affect Esther's development throughout the novel. Esther's mother is unsupportive when it comes to Esther's work, his illness, as well as her beliefs and life choices, and that affects Esther. Joan pushes Esther to recover by becoming her competition as well as guide. Even in death Joan helps to guide Esther forward. Both Mrs. Greenwood and Joan make Esther question herself, and each time she experiences the self-doubt Esther falters. She doesn't know what she wants to do or who she wants to be. That's okay. By the end of the novel Esther realizes that she doesn't have to know what's going to happen to be able to continue moving forward, and she knows that there are going to be plenty of people willing to help along the way.

*avoid editorial comments*

## Works Cited

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## Explaining Your Writing Variables

Identify the five writing variables you have chosen for your writing task ~~on the task~~

Central Idea: Mrs. Greenwood and Sean Gilling have the most impact on  
 Form: Essay Esther Greenwood  
 Purpose: To explain the influence of others on a person in the novel  
 Public Audience: Depressed suicidal young adults searching for someone to blame. The Bell Jar  
 Context: Therapist/Counsellor office during her journey through mental illness by Sylvia Plath

Explain how your chosen writing variables work together to make your text effective.

5 marks

110

I chose to write about Mrs. Greenwood and Sean Gilling's effect on Esther Greenwood throughout the novel The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath in order to explore the influence of others on a person during their battle through mental illness because these characters both had very different impacts on Esther throughout the duration of the story. I chose to explore this topic through an essay because an essay allows me to use other resources and facts to support my ideas and I am able to fully explain each idea. I designed this essay for depressed and/or suicidal young adults who are looking to understand how the people in their life affect their recovery because this essay proves the difference in influence between negative and positive people during one's recovery. I would place this essay in a therapist's or counsellor's office because that is a safe environment where they would have someone nearby to speak with them about the contents and to help them understand as well as come to terms with it on their own. The factual idea of an essay will also help with this process.