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Symbols of Unrealistic Expectations in Sylvia Plath’s Novel, *The Bell Jar*

Unrealistic expectations are often over glorified realities that society tends to subscribe to. Individuals who try to fulfill unrealistic expectations are controlled by others within the general population. In Sylvia Plath’s novel, *The Bell Jar*, male figures project dominance which then leads to unrealistic expectations, resulting in control over women. This patriarchal like society projects an aura of an inability to thrive if one is to be a woman. Males within the era of this novel expect women to provide house labor and sexual acts for their own manly gratification. It is unrealistic to degrade an individual because of their gender, even though such behavior takes place in Plath’s novel. The main character in the novel, is a young woman named Esther, who faces degradation from men and society due not only to her gender, but also to her mental health issues. Esther is a victim of this patriarchal like society, as she faces a time unable to overcome male dominance and stereotypes. Esther comes to demonstrate her resiliency and adversity throughout the plot and finds her own way to become her own person. Plath incorporates symbols throughout the novel that contribute to the notion of Esther becoming her own person while abiding unrealistic expectations from not only male figures, but also the general population of society. Male figures in the novel symbolize the idea of dominance, however, Plath utilizes imagery of the mirror and the fig tree to contribute to the idea of Esther’s inability to abide by the unrealistic expectations from individuals around herself.

In Plath’s novel, male figures portray patriarchal like characteristics, which established a dominant tone for the novel; this gives the reader a chance to relate to Esther on an emotional level due to the deeply emotional situations. Buddy Willard is a persistent figure within Esther’s life; he is a privileged, entitled, and an arrogant male who provides nothing but weight down onto Esther’s shoulders, “Buddy signifies everything that Esther is not…” (Christiana Yoo). As he symbolizes everything Esther is not, Buddy’s presence degrades Esther’s ability to become a strong individual. He is a dominant male symbolizing the control he has over her while projecting false love and false statements regarding his sexual activities, “Esther feels that Buddy does not genuinely love her for her.” (Christiana Yoo). Demonstrating his arrogant behaviors causes for chaos to arise, as Buddy demonstrates vague truthful feelings for Esther along the plot; her ability to become her own person will formulate out of the realization of his toxic presence. Buddy Willard demonstrates the era of the novel as he acts arrogantly like the norm, “At times in the 1950’s women were expected to act demure and had limitations in society, men were deemed to be patriarchal leaders in society and involving themselves in adulterous acts were considered the norm” (Christiana Yoo). Esther is an individual who does not act demure, and yet she is able to make her own choices. Sylvia Plath incorporates Esther’s interactions with Buddy to symbolize the patriarchal like society. However, she was able to overcome adversity, demonstrating her resiliency. Esther’s individuality formulates with the reflection of her life.

Glass mirrors reflect the world around themselves and have the ability to project the visual truth. Esther is an individual often overpowered by the truth. She faces challenges when looking into mirrors, simply because she did not like what she sees, “Over time, Esther’s reflection becomes more negative and corrupted…” (Isabella Katzman). This negativity and corruption overpowers Esther and leads to the challenge of her personal mental health. Having mental health problems within the era of the novel was often denied and shunned due upon to the society’s inability to understand or support the issues. As previously stated, women were expected to act demure, although Esther does not; she is simply different, reasoning for the event of constantly being shunned by the society around herself. Plath incorporates the mirror to demonstrate Esther’s disconnect from society, “The recurring mirror represents the progress of her state of her mind, as it becomes more chaotic and unattached to her best interests…” (Isabella Katzman). The chaotic and unattached individual Esther presents herself as is merely the perception of society as they have the inability to understand or support her through degrading times. Although Esther is affected by mental health, she does not let that drag her down. Her reflections of reality helps her to focus solely on herself moving into the future with or without help from those around her. She is determined to make her own decisions without any condescending exterior factors.

As time progresses through the novel, many opportunities come upon Esther. These opportunities are often referred to as figs. Each fig chosen from the tree of life will help shape and form neither men nor societal expectations, but only Esther into the person she is as she says, “I am. I am. I am” (Plath 256). Esther’s realization of herself to be her own lively person symbolizes the idea of individuality within the challenging times, allowing for her own personal and true self to formulate. Plath incorporates Esther’s personality to be determined, along with her ability to abide by stereotypical norms, “She is at odds with avoiding the society’s anticipations for women to behave reserved and compliant in nature”. (Christiana Yoo). Despite difficulties encountered while taking a stand for own being, Esther is able to find herself as she is living her life without the containment of dominant men or the stereotypical society. Esther’s voice and actions project higher odds of progressing forward with gender equality.

The vintage era of Plath’s novel can be closely related to modern society on different degrees and extents. All the incorporated symbols contribute to Esther’s individuality progression throughout the novel. The realization of dominating men symbolizes the need for change, the fig tree and mirror symbolize Esther’s ability to become her true self while dismissing the oppressive society. Overcoming adversity is something women have had to face for many decades, and still face today. Many men and societal expectations have remained unrealistic; however, the complexity of expectations have changed over the decades, in a sense of correlation to modern expectations. Sylvia Plath’s novel is a staple piece of literature, as it demonstrates many reasonings to eliminate the action of a degrading gender inequality and unrealistic expectations towards individuals. This is still a problem today within modern life and society needs to accept the fact of gender inequality and unrealistic expectations to make a change. Going forward into the future, society needs to collaborate in hopes of creating an opportunity of equality and realistic expectations for not only women, but everyone. Everyone within the evolved society will create the elimination of negative aspects and create a blooming succuss amongst everyone, equally.

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