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Ms. Smith ✓

Symbolism throughout The Bell Jar ✓

Symbols are used to add significance to writing by representing something more than what they are. Sylvia Plath uses symbolism in The Bell Jar to represent different aspects of Esther's ~~story~~ story. Symbols are used to give the reader insight into how Esther is feeling. Each of the symbols used helps to create a more dimensional view of who Esther is. Symbolism is used throughout The Bell Jar to represent Esther's varying emotions at different times throughout the novel. ✓

Esther struggles with her emotions as well as her identity throughout the novel. The repetition of mirrors and reflections during Esther's life represents how she is trying to understand herself ✓ (Sparknotes). As Esther progresses through her life, she struggles to figure out who she is and who she wants to be. When presented with a reflection, Esther often does not recognize the person she is looking at. In the reflection of her hotel elevator, Esther sees herself and says, "I noticed a big smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked." (Plath p.19) ✓ which shows her confusion in who she is. When Esther is presented with a mirror, she believes that the image that she is seeing is merely a picture until the picture imitates her facial expressions. This failure to recognize her own reflection shows the reader Esther's continuous failure to recognize who she is. During Esther's time in New York, she meets Doreen, who she immediately connects with ✓ (Plath p.5). Doreen makes Esther feel special because of the connection they share. Unlike Esther, Doreen is outgoing and rebellious. When Esther is with Doreen,

she seems to forget her worries and she feels cynical. (Plath p.8) Doreen brings out a different side of Esther at times, but Esther cannot live in that persona indefinitely. Underneath everything that Doreen has created for her, Esther still feels empty, searching for something to fill her void. Esther struggles with this emptiness and says:

I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo. (Plath p.3)

This shows the reader that the emptiness that Esther experiences is causing her to feel numbness, as if she cannot react to her emotions. Esther increasingly struggles to keep the outward self she presents to world united with the inner self that she experiences. Esther feels as if she has to project a persona to the world that is very different from whom she believes she is inside. This is why Esther creates the character of Elly Higginbottom from Chicago. (Plath p.12) Esther can be whoever she wants to be through Elly Higginbottom and she takes comfort in people not knowing who she is. When she is not Elly Higginbottom, Esther's inner persona continues to search for a way to connect who she is with who she wishes to be. As Esther struggles to identify who she is, she undergoes many changes.

Throughout her journey, the shedding of blood marks major for Esther. Blood symbolism is used throughout the novel to demonstrate how transformations, for Esther, involve sacrifice and pain. Esther's virginity is a milestone that has been weighing on her ever since she found out about the corruption of Buddy Willard. (Plath p.240) Esther wants to lose her virginity so badly that she comes close to being raped in the process. When Esther meets Marco, she describes him as a, "woman hater." (Plath p.113) Despite this, when Marco makes advanced towards Esther, she does not resist. Marco

pushes Esther to the ground and she passively thinks that if she were to lie there and do nothing, it would happen. (Plath p.115) Esther comes to her senses and begins to fight back. After Esther punches Marco, he smears his blood on her cheeks like war paint. Esther allows this blood to remain because she finds these marks, "touching, and rather spectacular." (Plath p.120) Esther takes pride in the blood marks as they represent accomplishment for her. When Esther accomplishes the task of losing her virginity, she finds reassurance in the fact that she is bleeding. (Plath p.242) The blood shows Esther that she cannot possibly be a virgin anymore and the weight of that milestone is lifted from her. Blood symbolism is maintained throughout Esther's various suicide attempts.

One of Esther's ideas of how to kill herself involves cutting her wrists and letting herself descend into her bath tub. The bath represents purity and cleansing for Esther throughout the novel. The fact that one of her suicide attempt involves the bath suggests to the reader that Esther wants to die in order to be cleansed of the life she has lived. Esther cannot cut through the pure, innocent skin of her wrists, so she decides to let the razor slash the thicker skin of her calf. (Plath p.156) Esther bandages this cut which shows the reader that Esther's underlying desire to live is becoming more prominent.

Throughout Esther's journey, the constant rhythm of her heart beats in the background of her life. When Esther is close to death, she hears a rhythm of her heart that beats, "I am, I am, I am." (Plath p.166) This beating represents Esther's bodily desire to live. Only the question remains whether or not Esther's desire to live is merely bodily. During Esther's suicide attempts, she continuously over thinks each situations, talking herself out of many of her proposed ideas. (Enotes) Esther finds herself making excuses for why she shouldn't kill herself. This suggests that Esther does not want to end her life, but rather feels as though suicide is the only option she has. Esther's indecision with her suicide attempts carries over into the indecision throughout her life choices

The Fig Tree is a symbol used throughout The Bell Jar to represent the choices that Esther is presented with. Esther struggles to decide on her plans for the future and who she wants to be when she gets there. Esther feels overwhelmed by her choices and by what each choice holds. She explains that she is paralyzed with indecision by saying:

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful; future beckoned and winked.

One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving myself to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

(Plath p.81)

When Esther is presented with too many options, even if they are beneficial to her, she becomes so overwhelmed that she cannot choose anything, thus causing her options to disappear. Esther feels like she constantly has options in front of her that she cannot choose between. These options weigh on her in the same way that the bell jar does.

The bell jar itself represents the madness that forever hangs over Esther. When Esther talks about the bell jar, she feels as if she is inside an airless jar that distorts her perspective of the world and prevents her from connecting with the people around her. (Sparknotes) The bell jar represents how Esther's illness consumes and traps her. Throughout the novel, Esther tries to ignore the fact that the bell jar is descending upon her, which only makes her atmosphere more stifling. As the bell jar descends

upon Esther, her madness becomes suffocating and she can no longer ignore it. Esther is frustrated because no matter what she is doing or where she is, she sits alienated under the same glass bell jar.

The recycled air of Esther's bell jar keeps her madness trapped inside. When the suffocation of the bell jar becomes too stifling, Esther is introduced to Dr. Nolan who lifts her bell jar and allows her to breathe again. As Esther progresses through her treatment with Dr. Nolan, the weight of her bell jar becomes increasingly lighter. (Cliffs Notes) Although Esther welcomes health, she has a constant fear of the re-decent of her suffocating bell jar. Esther feels that she will move on and become healthy again but that her bell jar will remain overhead ready to fall and trap her inside. This fear in Esther's mind reminds the reader of how fragile Esther's sanity is and allows them to continuously wonder whether she is better or not.

Sylvia Plath uses symbolism that involves mirrors, blood, fig trees, and a bell jar to depict the emotions of Esther Greenwood. Without symbolism, Esther's character would lack depth and would fail to resonate with the reader. Esther's struggle with mental illness is brought to life through the use of symbols and motifs which create a complex story that allows the reader to make insightful connections throughout the text. The symbolism used throughout The Bell Jar emphasizes the compelling story that is Esther and gives the reader a better understanding of the struggles she undergoes.

Works Cited

Cliffs Notes. n.p., n.d. Web. 05 December 2014.

Enotes. n.p., n.d. Web. 03 December 2014.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1966. Print.

Sparknotes. n.p., n.d. Web. 08 December 2014.

Explaining Your Writing Variables

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

Central Idea: To explain how the emotions of someone who is depressed relates to symbolism

Form: Essay

Purpose: To show how someone with depression feels

Public Audience: People studying depression/suicide

Context: Depression analysis conference

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

5 marks

I believe that an essay is the best way to explain how the emotions of someone who is depressed relates to symbolism. By presenting this information at a conference containing people who are studying depression or suicide, I am able to shed some light on the way someone with depression may feel. By presenting this idea as an essay, my information is structured and organized while still remaining insightful. I think it is important to share this idea with people who are studying depression because it is not medical or generic, but merely expresses what the depressed mind feels like. It is important to connect symbolism because it provides a new way of thinking about depression. I believe this information would be beneficial to those studying depression as well as those suffering

Alley

Formal Outline

I. **Thesis statement** - Symbolism is used throughout The Bell Jar to represent Esther's emotions at certain points throughout the story.

II. **Topic sentence** - The repetition of mirrors and reflections represents how Esther is trying to understand herself.

- a. struggling to figure out who she is
 - i. "Number 1" p. 3 p. 5 p. 183 p. 154
- b. Inner + outer persons connection

i. no one understands her, trouble connecting who she is to everyone to who she is inside.

***Transition sentence** - As Esther struggles to identify who she is, she undergoes many changes.

III. **Topic sentence** - The shedding of blood marks a transition for Esther.

- a. transformation through sacrifice
 - i. p. 156 cutting leg p. 155 wrists * Maria

- b. Esther's body, underlying desire to live.
 - i. indecision in suicide attempts

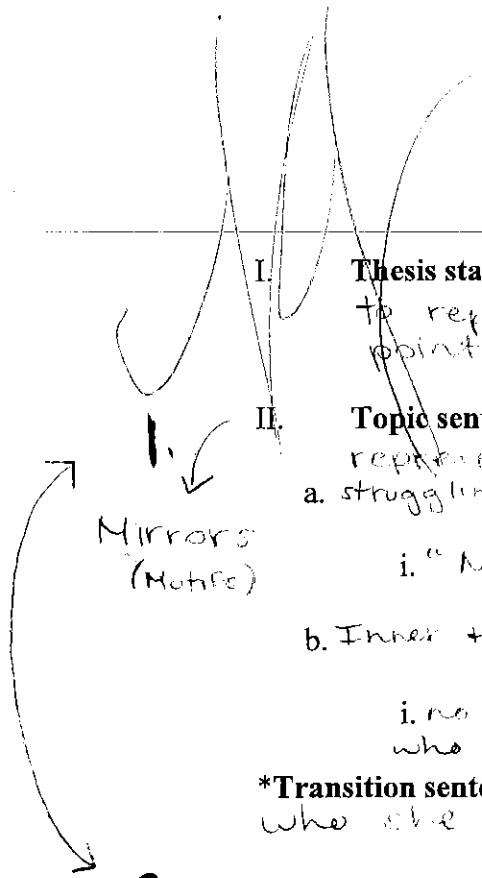
***Transition sentence** - Esther's indecision with her suicide attempts carries over into the indecision with planning out her life choices.

IV. **Topic sentence** - The Bell Jar represents the madness that forever hangs over Esther.

- a. Bell Jar represents how Esther's illness consumes her
 - i. Even when she feels okay, the weight of the Bell Jar hangs upon her.
- b. Represents that Esther becomes paralyzed
 - i. overwhelmed with indecision - p. 81.

***Concluding sentence** - The symbolism used throughout the Bell Jar allows us to see into Esther's reality and understand her better.

V. **Conclusion** - Sylvia Plath uses symbolism throughout the Bell Jar to express how Esther feels and the struggles she undergoes.



1. Mirrors (Mirrors)

2. Blood

Beating Heart (I am, I am...)

4. Bell Jar

3. 1. Fig Tree (indecision/suicide) p. 81, 78

195, 250, 227, 251, 251