

Sylvia Plath's Character Esther Greenwood Viewed from a Psychoanalytic Perspective

By: Alexa Beck

It mightn't make me any happier, but it would be one more pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles. (*The Bell Jar* Plath 83)

Exploring the depths of the mind is a complex and multi-faceted process that aims to distinguish why and how personality develops in individuals. One theory, in particular, looks at the unconscious mind and how past experiences contribute to the development of unique personalities over time. For the purpose of this paper, the term unconscious will be referred to as subconscious. Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, two well-known psychologists, both hypothesized how personality was formed and categorized their work under the psychoanalytic perspective. Many of Freud and Jung's psychoanalytical concepts are found in *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. The novel highlights the mental illness of Esther Greenwood and showcases her slow descent into madness and depressive thinking as she explores her desires and purpose in the city of New York in the 1950s. However, readers begin to question why Esther may reject relationships, act bluntly and judgmentally, and develop an obsession with death throughout the novel. If one is to explore the story Plath has created, it becomes clear that, according to Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Esther's character, feelings, and behaviors are the results of her exposure to sexual repression, her father's passing when she was young, and the drives of her subconscious mind.

When it comes to the psychoanalytical perspective, there is a multitude of terminology and concepts that one should become aware of before applying its ideas to outside works such as *The Bell Jar*. It is essential to understand the relationship between the three components of Freud's main theory of personality—the id, ego, and superego (Ciccarelli 477). The id is often thought of as the pleasure-seeking component of the personality and has no regard for consequences because it is an unconscious part of the mind (478). An example of the id in action in *The Bell Jar* can be found in the character of Doreen who acts impulsively and without a second thought. Such risky actions like entering Lenny Shepherd's apartment without the knowledge of its safety prove why the id can be so dangerous and needs its ego and superego counterparts.

In comparison to the other components, the superego is the “director” and drives a person towards the best solution or way of thinking after thoughtful consideration of consequences. A person's guilt and morals now play a role in part of their conscious mind with the realization that actions have their positive and negative consequences (479). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther demonstrates the use of her superego when determining how to carry out the dismissal of Buddy Willard after he seemingly betrays her. Being that the superego carries out the thoughts of an individual, this is the component that can be identified most of the time through a person's actions and behavior.

Finally, like the superego, the ego is described as “mostly conscious and is far more rational, logical, and cunning than the id,” and can openly deny the id's absurd desires (479). The ego does not carry our direction but, rather, provides insight for the superego to carry out through a person's actions, mannerisms, and character. A simple example of the ego in *The Bell Jar* is the first-person narrative Sylvia Plath chooses for the novel because it allows the reader to see inside the mind of Esther as she is experiencing everything in real-time. Readers can connect all of the



components of Freud's theory on personality as Esther tells her side of the story and explains her thoughts and reasonings for her actions throughout the course of novel.

Although each component of Freud's theory on personality is important on its own, it is essential to understand that, together, they create a person's psyche. The psyche can be considered a person's soul, personality, or developed mentality. Freud's three components constantly conflict with one another to function and carry out final decisions for the person in question, regardless of whether or not the person is consciously aware of this process at the time. The concept of a person's psyche becomes essential later when looking at Plath's character, Esther Greenwood, and analyzing how her behavior has resulted from her unconscious mind and underlying thoughts.

Since Freud's findings are not the only psychoanalytical aspects found in *The Bell Jar* it is important to be aware of Carl Jung's Neo-Freudian idea of a collective unconscious, as well. Jung ultimately argues that there is more to the unconscious mind than Freud thinks and that many concepts, such as archetypes, traverse across the world universally to create the unique personalities of people. Ciccarelli's book *Psychology* focuses on theories of personality and provides an overview of Jung's main ideas:

According to Jung, the collective unconscious contains a kind of "species" memory, memories of ancient fears and themes that seem to occur in many folktales and cultures. These collective, universal human memories were called archetypes by Jung. There are many archetypes, but two of the more well known are the anima/animus (the feminine side of a man/the masculine side of a woman)...The side of one's personality that is shown to the world is termed the persona. (482-83)

Respectively, Jung's archetypes are found within the narrative of *The Bell Jar* and can be used to connect Esther to her mental illness and how her unconscious mind has, in turn, affected her relationships and her perception of the world.

The exposition of *The Bell Jar* introduces Esther as an overachieving nineteen-year-old with high expectations and a bright future. In New York, Esther is awkward, out of place, and heavily reliant on the fact that she is only in this position due to a scholarship granted for her poetry and writing skills. Despite the exact year not being disclosed, it is logical to conclude that the story takes place in the 1950s because Esther and the other female characters are exposed to strong societal demands and repression of sexuality. According to Khan Academy, it was not until the late 1960s that ideas of a sexual revolution began to spark the nation; for now, the 1950s were "often viewed as a period of conformity, when both men and women observed strict gender roles and complied with society's expectations" ("Women in the 1950s").

As a result, sexuality plays a significant role in Esther's life and the development of her psyche throughout the novel. In *The Bell Jar*, three specific characters prove themselves to be archetypes of Esther's character, including: Doreen, Esther's flamboyant roommate; Buddy Willard, her former lover; and a woman named Dodo Conway, who seemingly has it all. Doreen is the complete opposite of Esther as she is what represents the freedom Esther wishes she could obtain. Susanna Barlow, a writer and journalist who has studied archetypes for years, described Doreen's character as a rebel archetype. Specifically, in her article "Understanding the Rebel Archetype," Barlow defines the rebel to have the "definitive behavior of the American individual and is inexorably linked to freedom" (Barlow). Early in the novel, Doreen puts both her and Esther in a risky and uncomfortable situation by going to Lenny Shepherd's apartment. It is significant to note that Esther would never seek out such risky adventures as Doreen; hence, Plath must show qualities that Esther does not possess through Doreen's character.

Similarly, Buddy Willard reflects Carl Jung's concept of the animus, which represents the masculine qualities of a human being. For example, Esther did not see Buddy as a horrible man until he told her of his premarital affair that resulted in the loss of his virginity. To Esther, Buddy had become a newfound hypocrite, unable to control his sexual desires with the underlying intention of betraying her all along. However, by looking at such a situation from a psychoanalytical perspective, it is clear that Buddy is used by Plath to symbolize Esther's sexual repression and lack of masculine qualities—like a sex drive. To the reader, Buddy is a prime example of the men of Esther's time. This is mainly because he is aware of his sexuality, is not afraid to dabble with the world around him and is in pursuit of a good doctoral career, alongside balancing his own social life. Finally, it is also important to observe that Esther only calls Buddy a hypocrite when the topics of sexuality and masculinity are brought up; ironically, both happen to be concepts that Esther has little to no experience with within this society.

Lastly, Esther's anima, or representation of her lost feminine qualities, is her seemingly perfect hometown neighbor, Dodo Conway. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther implies her feelings towards Dodo when she states, "Dodo interested me in spite of myself...I watched Dodo wheel the youngest Conway up and down. She seemed to be doing it for my benefit. Children make me sick" (Plath 30). Even Esther recognizes how Dodo is a complete contrast to her own character and stands in for what a woman in the 1950s should begin to establish for herself—a house, a marriage, and children. Instead of acting upon society's demands, Esther isolates herself to stay clear of the expectations she is not meeting. It is a combination of these archetypes that slowly makes Esther's life a living hell to try to thrive in. Ultimately, she is left to feel the inadequacy of her existence alone.

Another significant event in Esther's life that influenced her entire character is her father's death. In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath allows her own life story to shine through Esther; this connection allows Plath to build upon Esther's grief and obsession with death in the novel because Plath can truly connect to her character. Saul McLeod, a psychology teacher and researcher, mentions the importance of one of Freud's concepts called the Electra complex in his article titled "Freud's Psychosexual Theory and 5 Stages of Human Development." In this article, he states that "a child becomes aware of anatomical sex differences, which sets in motion the conflict between erotic attraction, resentment, rivalry and jealousy, and fear which Freud called... the Electra complex (in girls). This is resolved through the process of identification..." (McLeod). This concept of the Electra complex can be used to explain how the drives of Esther's unconscious mind cause her to develop maladaptive habits when it comes to relationships.

Because a person is not aware of their latent thoughts, the use of talk therapy, utilized by both Freud and Jung, becomes essential to Esther's development and self-awareness. Psychoanalytical talk therapy has the potential to help patients become aware of underlying problems from the past and use this newfound information to help them in the future (Docalavich 74). An example of talk therapy occurs on page 227 of *The Bell Jar* when Esther states, "'I hate her,' I said, and waited for the blow to fall. But Dr. Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, 'I suppose you do'" (Plath 227). It was at this moment that Esther's mind was finally allowed to free itself and exclaim a thought from her unconscious mind that later explains why, exactly, she may feel and act differently than others in society.

In addition to Esther's remark about her mother, it can be concluded that Esther's obsession with death in the novel can be attributed to the fact that her mother never let her properly mourn her father's death. In the novel, Esther herself even alludes to this idea by stating, "Then I found my father's gravestone...I sat down in the sopping grass. I couldn't

understand why I was crying so hard. Then I remembered I had never cried for my father's death" (Plath 186-87). This scene clearly illustrates the unconscious effect death has had on Esther, even if she cannot recall such tragic events in depth. Her statement, "I couldn't understand why I was crying so hard" is a key component in showing how a significant event that happened early on in her life can drastically end up becoming a main source of conflict in her present life (Plath 187).

Finally, Plath makes it clear from the first chapters that Esther has a serious problem when it comes to facing reality and the harsh demands of society; as a result, Elly Higginbottom and Elaine are the names of the two alter-egos that Esther conjures up to mask herself from life around her. This metaphorical mask that Esther likes to put on can be psychologically defined as her persona or the side of her personality she chooses to display to the world (Ciccarelli 482-83). The persona that Esther presents to those she does not personally know allows her to act more freely without feeling anxious about not meeting the 1950s social expectations. In her article titled, "What is Masking in Mental Health," PsyD. Amy Marschall, a clinical psychologist, explains that "the goal of masking is to appear as though you are not experiencing mental health symptoms or struggling even when this is not true" (Marschall). An example of Esther's masking is when she uses her alias Elly Higginbottom when interacting with male characters like the sailor from Chicago and Lenny Shepherd's friend from the bar. This masking technique can be seen as a defense mechanism for Esther; ultimately, this alias acts as a form of identification for her to hide her true self-loathing personality from society. *The Bell Jar* showcases other subtle defense mechanisms Esther uses to try and hide, or dismiss, her mental health such as repression towards her father's death and the projection of her own actions onto others, like Buddy Willard. Esther was quick to call Buddy a hypocrite for doing activities that she could not bring herself to do because if she projected a negative perspective onto him then she would not have to face her own failures. Esther convinced herself that Buddy was the one to blame for their falling out because it allowed Esther not to face the consequences of her actions in the relationship and point her finger at anyone else but herself.

Overall, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath uses the character of Esther Greenwood as an example to highlight the consequences that societal demands and expectations can have on a person, along with showcasing how the psyche of a person can be greatly affected by one's unconscious mind and repressed thoughts. The novel's strong emotional connections, personal and semi-autobiographical events, and traumatic twists allow readers to fully grasp what Esther means when she states, "It mightn't make me any happier, but it would be one more pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles" (Plath 83). By the novel's end, one can take away the notion that no one is perfect and that life will always have its ups and downs; for everyone, the best thing to do is look beyond the negatives today and make room for the more efficient pebbles, or events, no matter the size. This is because a loss of hope will get a person nowhere except an endless tunnel of self-doubt and self-sabotage. I believe that a character like Esther Greenwood showcases the harsh reality of life and how trauma varies from person to person in hopes of empowering others and promoting better mental health treatment.

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