

Feminism in *The Bell Jar*

Student Name

University

Course

Professor Name

Date

Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. The representation of feminism in *The Bell Jar*
 - A. Women's role in society in the middle of the XX-century USA
 - B. 'The bell jar' of Sylvia Plath reflected in the novel
 - C. The main questions of feminist agenda represented in *The Bell Jar*
- III. Conclusion

Feminism in *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar is an autobiographical novel by Sylvia Plath, published in 1963. The prototype of the main character is Plath herself, who reflects on her experience of being married to Ted Hughes and her way as a female writer. The novel, which tells the story of nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood, has become a cult work among feminists because of its tragic and actual content. The protagonist faces social prejudice and condemnation from her family and has to go a long way towards accepting herself and her value in society despite all cultural stereotypes. The main theme of the novel – the role of women in society – is the most important subject of the feminist agenda.

The Representation of Feminism in *The Bell Jar*

The Bell Jar was one of the first works in which issues of gender discrimination were overtly discussed. Since the narration takes place in the 1950s, the events of the novel should be related to the second-wave feminist movement. Women in the middle of the XX-century no longer demanded the acquisition of basic rights at the legislative level, they fought for gender equality in the common and professional spheres. This struggle, external and internal, was expressed in the character of Esther Greenwood.

Women's Role in Society in the Middle of the XX-century USA

The demographic crisis of the 1950s negatively affected the position of women in the American society. The formation of the 'American Dream' was carried out by promoting the image of an ideal family in media: a big house, two children of different sexes and a happy smiling housewife. Women who wanted to make careers on an equal basis with men faced harsh criticism and condemnation. Esther Greenwood was forced to follow the same path: she dreamt of becoming a writer, which was an unsuitable profession for women in the 1950s. Those women, who, for one reason or another, could not meet the criteria for an ideal wife, had an intrapersonal conflict. *The Bell Jar* draws attention of the reader towards female exploitation

under the banner of the institution of marriage (Imtiaz et al. 2019). The duty of each woman to get married destroys both the heroine's life and the life of Sylvia Plath herself. Internal problems caused by intransigence with the patriarchal world led to the mental illness of the main character. The struggle of a young woman for public recognition in the patriarchal world formed the basis of Sylvia Plath's novel.

'The Bell Jar' of Sylvia Plath Reflected in the Novel

Sylvia Plath expressed the difficulties associated with gender discrimination, which she herself had to go through, in *The Bell Jar*. The novel is based on self-reflection and the tradition of confessional literature. This allows considering this work as a vivid example of modernism in literature (Gourley, 2018). However, it was not only the literary tendency that forced the author to write such a novel, in fact, she needed to express her own experiences. The main plot line is almost completely identical to the events happened with Plath in 1953. She became a laureate of a literary competition and received an invitation to an internship at a publishing house, just like Esther Greenwood. The cruelty of the real world towards the young female writer Plath also reflected in the novel. In addition, the novel describes cases of abusive behavior on the part of men, which the author herself had to experience. Although Plath never described herself as a feminist, she managed to create a real manifest encouraging women to fight for their rights.

The Main Questions of Feminist Agenda Represented in *The Bell Jar*

The main themes raised by the second-wave feminism movement – discrimination of women in the professional sphere and in matters of marriage and childbirth – are reflected in *The Bell Jar*. The main character, like thousands of other women in 1950s, tries to speak out against gender discrimination. To fight against it, she chooses the most correct way: solving internal problems and getting rid of inner misogyny.

One of the main themes of the feminist agenda is the fight against offending women

stereotypes, which Esther Greenwood successfully wins. She proves that even an emotional and sensitive person can be strong. The creator of the novel destroyed the stereotype of female emotionality as a weak side, since she herself constantly faced it. Sylvia Plath is treated differently: she is both a talented writer and just a hysterical woman (Felski, 2020). However, Esther Greenwood's example shows that the feminist struggle against stereotypes is not vain: she managed to prove her worth and importance, despite the prejudices.

Professional discrimination of women is also perfectly reflected in the novel. Esther Greenwood is surprised that it is much easier to become a famous writer being a man, not a woman. It is especially difficult for woman to withstand the competition when a famous and talented male writer is her husband or partner: this happened both in the novel and in real life. Sylvia Plath was able to achieve only posthumous recognition of her talent. However, even nowadays, many people know her not as a talented writer, but as a wife of the famous poet Ted Hughes (Frances-White, 2019). Fortunately, the heroine of the novel manages to prove to the society and, first of all, to herself that her talent is significant.

Finally, a very important topic of the feminist agenda is the unequal roles of men and women in romantic relationships, and it is one of the main motives of the novel. Sylvia Plath herself is trying to get over a difficult breakup with Ted Hughes throughout the novel. According to the writer, it was her husband who triggered her mental illness. Relationship with him became a kind of the 'bell jar' for Plath, hindering her creative realization as a writer. Ted Hughes is to blame for the fact that the novel was not published for so long. Esther Greenwood meets violent men who do not believe in her success in literature, as well as her creator. However, she manages to resist the world and defend her rights to success, recognition, and happiness.

Conclusion

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath represents the problems of a young woman defending her

rights to public recognition. The author reflects on her own thoughts about the inequality of men and women in the autobiographical novel. The main issues raised in the novel correspond to the feminists of the second-wave agenda. The problems of personal formation in the patriarchal world, defending the significance of one's creativity and professional recognition, are reflected in this work. The powerful novel and the tragic fate of its author still inspire women to fight for equality.

References

- Imtiaz, M., Dr. Khan M.A., Shaheen A. (2019). Marriage and the exploitation of women: A case-study of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 7(2), 50-54. <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijll.v7n2a5>.
- Felski, R. (2020). *Literature after feminism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Frances-White, D. (2019). *The guilty feminist: You don't have to be perfect to overthrow the patriarchy*. Basic Book.
- Gourley, J. (2018). The same anew: James Joyce's modernism and its influence on Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 45(4), 695-723. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2018.0044>.