Challenging the Patriarchy: *The Bell Jar*’s Use of Esther to Critique Gender Expectations

**Abstract:**

Sylvia Plath’s 1963 novel, *The Bell Jar*, deals heavily with Esther Greenwood’s mental illness and accompanying depression. While the causes and consequences of her depression are crucial to the narrative, the larger implications of what this text is saying by way of her illness is a more fascinating study. Through an analysis of Esther’s reaction to marriage, motherhood, purity, and homosexuality, I investigate the novel’s view of the potential consequences of 1950s middle class society’s enforcement of a strict gender binary for women and men’s social roles. I argue *The Bell Jar* utilizes Esther’s mental illness to bring readers’ attention both to the inherent hypocrisy of stereotypical gender expectations and to issues that arise for women who attempt to become independent in a middle class heteronormative patriarchy. Through the depiction of Esther and her illness, the novel develops two main societal critiques. It shows how mental illness results when a woman rejects feminine expectations in a heteronormative patriarchy and it demonstrates the problem of society forcing women to submit to the indoctrination of patriarchal institutions. The novel paints a bleak picture of a woman’s role in society, where her job is to serve men, whether in the private sphere (cooking, cleaning, and rearing children) or in the public sphere (as a subservient employee to a man). Reading the text in this manner has broader implications for disability studies because it allows readers to evaluate mental illness as a (legitimate) consequence of the burdens society places on women and helps personify the negative effects of the heteronormative patriarchal society.