

Depression in Literature: Weapons against Oppression

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Introduction

In 1973, Victoria Lucas wrote,

I saw my life branching out before me like [a] green fig tree.... From the tip of the 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...; 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 to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind on which of the figs I would choose. (TBJ, 90-91)

It was unknown at the time that this visual of a fig tree would begin an entire literary genre dedicated to women's mental illness and shine a light on the patriarchal oppression that infected society. The metaphor of the figs gave readers and women in society a visual to describe the feelings of loss, agony, confusion, and grief for the lives they may never have. It offered a way for women to better express their confusion and agony at having to choose the different lifestyles presented to them, knowing they could not choose more than one. This type of confusion and worry led many women at the time to develop mental illnesses, suffering under the weight of the expectations and rules placed on their shoulders.

Victoria Lucas, better known as Sylvia Plath, published *The Bell Jar* with her famous passage and unknowingly began a movement. Over the next thirty years, women began coming forward and telling their own stories. They wrote about mental illness, the societal expectations that drove them to their downward mental spiral, and the impact of the men they had encountered. Following thirty years later and writing about experiences that happened in 1967, Susanna Kaysen published *Girl, Interrupted*. Kaysen's book was later made into a movie of the same name, rocketing it into the popular culture of the 1990's. The genre that Plath began lasts today, seen prominently in the young adult genre. Young women are still coming forward to write about their experiences. They are using their voices and their trauma and

their mental struggles to write against the society that shaped a system not intended for females.

Both *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted* approach the topic of mental health courageously, and both intend to show that women were not as fragile as society wanted to make them. Both books make the point that mental illness did not stem wholly from chemical imbalances or simple insanity; instead, mental illness was a way for women to rebel against the societal expectations placed on them in a world dominated by male thinking. Whether it be by being institutionalized or by making their voices heard, Kaysen and Plath embody the ideas of making the fight against society your own, tailored to your experiences and strength.

History of Mental Health in a Society That Condemned Nonconformity

For much of history, women were not diagnosed as depressed, anxious, or suffering from a chemical imbalance within the brain; instead, they were described as "hysterical." Often, hysteria was believed to have two kinds of causes: an issue regarding the misplacement of the uterus, or demonic possession and interaction with the Devil. Both ideas were developed by male physicians through the ages, without considering any input from the women whom they treated or, more accurately, whom they tortured with malpractice. Hysteria laid the foundation for how society could control and categorize the women who did not conform to the traditional idea of femininity.

However, hysteria must be given a certain amount of respect, as it is identified as the first mental disorder attributable to women. It helped to eventually launch a lengthy trend of research into what causes hysteria and eventually led to actual mental health descriptions and diagnoses for both genders.

The first description of hysteria is found in the Kahun Papyrus, written in 1900 B.C. by ancient Egyptians. The Papyrus claimed that the cause of hysteria was spontaneous uterine movement within the body. The Eber Papyrus, following in 1600 B.C., expanded on the treatment of uterine placement. Often considered the oldest medical document referring to depressive syndromes, the Eber proposed that fumigation, or the specific placement of perfumes or acrid

substances at the genitals or nose, could be used to return the uterus to its ideal position.

This idea was expanded upon by Plato, who argued “that the uterus is sad and unfortunate when it does not join with the male and does not give rise to a new birth” (Tasca et al., 110). Hippocrates, the first person to actually use the term *hysteria*, helped to build on the idea that it was caused by movement of the uterus. He even explained that “especially in virgins, widows, single, or sterile women, this ‘bad’ uterus—since it is not satisfied—not only produces toxic fumes but also takes to wandering around the body, causing various kinds of disorders such as anxiety, sense of suffocation, tremors, and sometimes even convulsions” (Tasca et al., 111). The general idea was that, since the uterus was not getting to do what men thought it should, it was wreaking havoc on the body and altering the female mind. The cause of hysteria was not simply the uterus. It was that the men in society found a way to blame the woman’s own body for not partaking in the role that women were expected to take.

The idea and use of fumigation lasted well into the Enlightenment period. Hypnosis and smelling salts were the common treatment for hysteric women. If a woman fainted, it was believed that the smelling salts would urge the uterus to its natural placement, bringing the woman back to her senses.

While the idea of fumigation lasted for nearly two millennia, the Greek physician Soranus wrote against fumigation as a treatment for hysteria in the second century A.D. Soranus, considered the father of gynecology and obstetrics, wrote that it was not the lack of birth or sex that made a woman hysterical, but rather that madness was the result of too much. He believed abstinence and perpetual virginity was the ideal feminine state. Soranus also proposed that “the hysterical body should be treated with care: hot baths, massages, [and] exercise are the best prevention of such women’s diseases” (Tasca et al., 111). By advocating for the modern version of self-care and promoting the idea of abstinence instead of procreation, Soranus was speaking against his predecessors’ ideas. Yet he was still focused on the sexual aspect of hysteria, still ignorant to the idea that it may be mental and not physiological.

As time moved on and civilization entered into the Middle Ages, political events led to a great change in how hysteria was viewed. No longer were doctors blaming the uterine movement; instead, as Christianity took hold as the major religion, it was believed that hysteria was the work of demonic interactions. The misogynistic view of pseudoscience blaming hysteria on the woman’s own traitorous body turned to the ideal of simple evil. Women who were hysteric and not aligning with societal expectations must be involved in dark arts or magic, considering that the woman’s role in Christianity was to be seen, not heard, and to obey their husbands diligently and unflinchingly.

In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas stated his belief that women were a “failed man” and that a

woman’s inferiority is a punishment from the original sin, Eve eating the forbidden fruit and causing humans to be cast out of the Garden of Eden. If a woman was already being punished for her sinful nature, then it was not a far leap to the assumption that women would also be in cahoots with the Devil himself. Tasca aptly sums up this idea: “From the thirteenth century onwards, . . . many manifestations of mental illness were seen as obscene bonds between women and the devil. ‘Hysterical’ women are subjected to exorcism. . . . If in early Christianity, exorcism was considered a cure but not a punishment, in the late Middle Ages it becomes a punishment and hysteria is confused with sorcery” (112). The Devil became the scapegoat for any unidentifiable cause of disease, and his demons specifically interfered with those who were more susceptible to depression or hysteria. Not coincidentally, it was women who were more prone to these diseases. This trend of thinking led to the witch hunts and continued persecution of women. Those women who did not comply or fit into the typical feminine role were considered witches or Satanic. If a woman did not marry in her life or was unable to have children, then it was due to some sort of interaction with a demon.

The exact rules of which interactions with demons led to which specific result in a female were unclear, but the logic and rules did not matter. What was important was how men were able to make the connection between the women who did not conform to expectations and a reason to punish and ostracize them from society. Claiming that it was for the greater good and to uphold the righteousness of the community, the male leaders would publicly humiliate and murder women who may have stepped outside of their perceived “natural roles” of life, casting out the believed demons or stripping away the demons’ power by killing the conduit, or the woman supposedly possessed. The demonological pathology was a way for society to punish those women who did not agree to the expectations given to them. And as the young girls who interacted with the supposed witches watched the hangings, beatings, and humiliation, the punishments served a secondary purpose: how to make sure that the next generation of women would be more willing to adopt those societal rules and stay in their place.

It is not until the Enlightenment that sorcery is viewed as ridiculous and the inherent misogyny in society is questioned. Physicians acknowledge that hysteria was one of the most complicated diseases, and they slowly begin to move away from hysteria’s association with the uterus, transferring their focus to causes in the brain. French physician Phillipe Pinel began to advocate for kinder treatment of those in asylums and freed the patients in a Paris sanatorium from their chains, teaching that “kindness and sensitivity towards the patient[s] are essential for good care” (Tasca et al., 114). The French father of neurology, Jean Martin Charcot, began to push for the systematic study of mental health, being one of

the first people to associate hysteria and other conditions with the neurological system instead of the uterus.

When Sigmund Freud entered the psychological community in the late nineteenth century, he once again returned the psychological view of hysteria back to a sex-linked idea. Even though the demonological approach to hysteria had made a significant end to the link between hysteria and the uterine placement, it was still widely believed that a woman's mental health could be connected with her sexual life. Freud insisted that "hysteria is a disorder caused by a lack of libidinal evolution...and the failure of conception is the result, not the cause, of the disease" (Tasca et al., 115). Freud is making the point that a woman who fails at society's expectations of motherhood is mentally ill. Herbert Spencer, the author of *Principles of Sociology* (1876), expanded on this claim, writing that "human development depended on the expenditure of a fixed fund of energy. Because women [have] depleted, or sacrificed, their energy in the reproductive processes, they were handicapped, even developmentally arrested, in their ability to compete intellectually" (Steen, 363). While Spencer was claiming that motherhood in general made women inferior, it was the same idea as Freud's. Motherhood and a woman's place and worth in society were intertwined and inseparable. This precedent set the mold for most of the psychiatric views of the future.

Societal expectations keep their hold on women and their subsequent mental illnesses to this day. Susanna Kaysen and Sylvia Plath both endured the lasting effects of the patriarchal views pertaining to what a woman should do in order to be a useful and productive member of society. The dogma that was established by Freud and his predecessors was holding psychiatry captive, with little other research being done on women's mental health. This stall in research and the willingness to accept Freud's sexist ideas halted and crippled the psychiatric field for far too long. Freud's ideas helped to cement the viewpoint that women were mentally inferior to men, and it offered misogynistic doctors the research needed to keep women oppressed and in their supposed place.

Patriarchy and the Written Portraits of Young Men

Kaysen and Plath felt the blatant judgement and oppression made by the societal expectations of women firsthand in a time that did not offer women the opportunity to have fulfillment in both a career and family life. While their healing was not properly supported by the psychiatric doctors whose sole job was to help, society was the driving force that led Kaysen and Plath to their subsequent mental breakdowns. Esther, Plath's narrator in *The Bell Jar*, states that she does not particularly want to marry or have children, yet makes multiple comments about her future children or husband. Readers can suspect that this was the same viewpoint Plath herself had, as scholars have determined that *The Bell Jar* was at least semi-autobiographical and depicts many of Plath's

own life experiences. This understanding that she would have kids was something that Esther, and Plath, had resigned themselves to, an unescapable path in life that each must follow at some point.

Susanna Kaysen had been a patient at McLean Hospital, a mental institution that had been visited by Plath. Her stay covered two years, from 1967 to 1969, and she was institutionalized due to a short meeting with a male therapist who sent her to the hospital on their first visit. *Girl, Interrupted* is the nonlinear memoir of the two years, bouncing from one memory to another, from one girl's story to the next, showing how all of the different women on the ward had gotten to McLean. At the end of her stay, Kaysen's release into the public after her hospitalization was brought by the power of a man, or rather, the marriage to one. The memoir's ending is reminiscent of a fairy tale, and Kaysen is released only when she is able to get married. If a sick woman is one who does not conform to social ideals, then this means that a woman who is able to get a husband and marry has recovered her senses and may return to the world. Elizabeth Marshall writes, "The same gendered criteria through which [Kaysen] was institutionalized allows [sic] for her entry back into the world" (125). Accepting cultural expectations, Kaysen traps herself within a marriage that ends in divorce. But it was her way to escape the hospital and to learn how to handle the world.

During the time that both Kaysen and Plath were writing, it was deemed that any sort of mental institution was a place of taboo, full of painful electroshock therapies and crazed people self-harming and diseased. This mindset was the general consensus of the public. These institutions were the best way to heal and help those suffering with mental illness, a hidden away location where the public would not have to concern themselves with those outside of conventional norms. Melva Steen spoke out against direct hospitalization as a way to cure, saying, "If depression in women results from oppression, hospitalization is not the answer" (368).

Kaysen would have disagreed with this on a personal level. As she wrote in *Girl, Interrupted*, "All my integrity seemed to lie in saying No. So the opportunity to be incarcerated was just too good to resist. It was a very big No—the biggest No this side of suicide" (*Girl*, 42). Throughout her experience with mental illness, Kaysen had experimented with a variety of self-harm techniques and other socially unacceptable actions, such as refusing to go to college or to try to find an immediate marriage when she became an adult. With phrasing like "incarceration," Kaysen illustrates the social perspective on entering into a mental institution. It was on par with the taboo of going to jail for an extended period of time. The time spent in a mental ward would label a person as a social leper, someone to be avoided at all costs. This admittance, and later acceptance of her situation, was Kaysen's way to show society that she was not

going to align with the societal norms that she was being forced into.

The resistance of the women in these writings shows how socially unacceptable rebellion was. They had no choice in saying “no” to children or a marriage, nor did they have the option to chase fulfilling lifestyles suited to them. These women knew that acting out against those practices that they did not like would gain them nothing and would only hurt them. However, by using the mental health diagnoses handed to them as a result of oppression, Kaysen and Esther Greenwood—and by proxy, Plath—were able to rebel in their own way; by using the system to their advantage, they were able to step away from the lives expected of them for a moment and find ways to be their own person.

There are stark differences in how to approach the oppression of societal views in various situations. However, most women can agree on one thing: men are upholding patriarchal oppression, sometimes without even knowing it.

A prime example of a man who unconsciously abused this power is the initial doctor that Kaysen meets at the beginning of *Girl, Interrupted*. While there were conflicting timelines between the doctor and Kaysen, it is well established that the doctor made a very quick decision in her admittance. He notices she is absentmindedly picking at a pimple and then remarks soon after, “‘Take her to McLean, ... and don’t let her out till you get there’” (8). Kaysen notes that he was indifferent and cold to the problems that she wanted to speak about and discuss. She was unable to make a statement of her own and had no real understanding of what was happening to her. Under the impression that she would be in residential treatment for only a couple of weeks, she signed herself in, since she was legally an adult at eighteen. However, Kaysen ended up spending nearly two years at McLean Hospital. She credits somewhat the doctor on his decision, stating that when he saw Kaysen at eighteen years old, he thought, “It’s a mean world out there.... He can’t in good conscience send her back into it, to become flotsam on the subsocietal [sic] tide that washes up now and then in his office, depositing others like her. A form of preventative medicine” (40).

Yet even this type of thinking shows a sense of carelessness in fully assessing the situation. The doctor was willing to send off a young, vulnerable patient, possibly under the idea that it was a means of protecting her. This shows the delusion of men in power, the sense that they know best, of course, for the young women who may fall prey to an unfair world. What this doctor was not fully aware of was the fact that he was contributing to this society by locking away a young girl who may have been able to serve the world without needing two years in a mental institution.

The primary examples of the patriarchal oppression happen in *The Bell Jar*. Readers first meet the infamous Buddy Willard, who is instantly associated with a cadaver’s head. Buddy had taken Esther to a hospital to look at the

cadavers and teach her about his medical background. Esther [Plath] remarks, “I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver’s head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar” (*TBJ*, 2). This was a direct indicator of the influence that Buddy Willard had on Esther, and she carried around Buddy and his view of life around with her for the rest of her life. Esther remarks throughout the book that she looked down on Buddy, an attitude that is especially evident during their sexual encounter. It was a very unsatisfactory experience for Esther and nowhere near appealing. Plath writes, “Then [Buddy] stood there in front of me and I kept on staring at him. The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed.... ‘I think you ought to get used to me like this,’ [Buddy] said.... Undressing in front of Buddy suddenly appealed to me about as much as having my Posture Picture taken at college” (80). Buddy’s expectation that she has to get used to him unclothed shows his automatic assumption that they will be married. This scene is a prime example of how little Buddy thinks of Esther and her own ideas, because, in his mind, she has no choice except to marry him. He does not care how uncomfortable she is or how awkward the situation has become, because he assumes that Esther is his property as a future wife.

His hypocrisy is also a turning point for Esther’s stance on Buddy. When he reveals that he had participated in an affair with a waitress at a summer job, Buddy is openly showing his hypocritical stance. Esther felt that he had only been pretending to be so innocent for her, a pure man who was simply following Esther’s lead and following his feelings in their physical relationship. This revelation was a turning point for Esther, the proverbial straw on the camel’s back. It is at this point that Esther realizes just how deeply Buddy has bought into the societal expectations that regard women as utilitarian and useful only when it benefits the men whom they are partnered with.

Leaving behind the insufferable Buddy, readers have to encounter Marco, the woman-hater. During a date where he becomes her escort, Marco offers Esther a diamond stick pin. When she takes it, Marco says, “‘Perhaps,’ the spark in Marco’s eyes extinguished, and they went black, ‘I shall perform some small service...worthy of a diamond’” (125). Esther later remarks that she had never met a woman-hater before. She was unprepared for the consequences of taking such a small thing like a diamond stickpin. Marco later attempts to rape Esther, until she fights back and throws the stickpin, allowing her to escape while Marco searches in the dark for his prized jewel.

This behavior is reflective of the idea that, in a man’s world, no gift is given without expectation of payment. It was an understood idea once Marco made his comment at the party, but yet no one thought to tell Esther what it might mean. The other parties were possibly used to this kind of transaction, something common in their society. It was an

ingrained part of the patriarchal society that had infested the upper-class social scene. Women were to take the gift and accept that they would have to offer payment, whether or not it was consensual.

Esther's encounter with Eric is deeply concerning on multiple levels. Aside from the fact that Eric seems to have some incestuous ideas about his sister, he makes the clear distinction between the women who have sex and those who do not. Those females who have sex cannot be loved, but those who are to be loved are too fragile and perfect to have sex. This is almost the exact basis of the idea of "purity" taught to young girls at churches across America, even in modern day. It has become common to have adolescent girls be taught the idea of purity and often given a purity ring, serving as a promise to save themselves sexually for marriage. The imagery in these classes or sermons is very similar to the ideas that Eric represents. A young girl who has sex before she is married is compared to a disposable Styrofoam cup, while a girl who saves herself is a teacup. The insults and psychological damage continue in the same trend as follows: chewed gum, a used tea bag, or a cup that multiple people have spit in. These all represent the idea that a woman who has sex before marriage is something worthless, possibly used once, and ultimately disposable. Eric's stance on sexual matters reflects this directly. Eric comments, "'A million years of evolution, ... and what are we? Animals' [Sex] was as boring as going to the toilet. [Esther] said maybe if you loved a woman it wouldn't seem so boring, but Eric said it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just like the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (*TBJ*, 93). The imagery used represents a woman worthy of love as something similar to a priceless antique or piece of art, simply for show and to look at. Any woman who takes part in any sexual act is an animal and only for bodily use. These ideas are based in the patriarchal ideas based around sex, showing how radically men could think about the use of women outside of a person to clean house and rear children.

These ideas taught at an extremely early age show how misogyny and the need for control of female sexuality starts young. These types of lessons are not taught to men. They are not compared to used tea bags or plastic cups. Sexuality for women is inherently sinful and poisoning, yet it is not preached that the poison may harm the girls themselves. Young girls are taught that sex at a young age may eventually give their husband—a man whom they probably have not even met yet—cause to not want them anymore. This mindset follows them throughout their life as they grow older. But the verbiage changes over time. It goes from the idea of being "impure" to being "promiscuous" (a kind allegation) and a "whore."

This kind of teaching raises the question about the standards for men in regard to their sexuality. When one

thinks about a woman who frequently dates and has casual sex, she may be considered a pariah to society or unfit for a relationship. However, it is hard to find a definite line for men between a "player" and a guy who is promiscuous. Even Kaysen asks, "How many girls do you think a seventeen-year-old boy would have to screw to earn the label 'compulsively promiscuous'?" Probably in the fifteen-to-twenty range, would be my guess—if they ever put that label on boys, which I don't recall their doing" (158).

It is this double standard that amazes Esther in *The Bell Jar*. While the main example of hypocrisy in the novel is Buddy Willard, readers also find that the double standard for sex could be found in popular magazine articles written by credible authors. Esther remembers reading an article by a female lawyer that said that men wanted to be pure for their wives but were not held to the same strict standards. Even if the men had had sex before, they still wanted to be the ones to teach their wives. Women were expected to be generally devoid of any type of sexual ideas or pleasures until they were married, when suddenly they should know all about sex and how to please their man. The lawyer also stated that men would of course try to persuade girls to have sex, but that was perfectly fine. It was up to the woman to continuously say "no" because if she were to give in, then the man would no longer respect her. This implies that a man would take "no" for an answer. But any woman is taught that this is not always the case and that shouting "Fire!" gets more attention than just screaming for help, just in case something were ever to happen.

The double standard represented by Buddy and the female lawyer demonstrate the maddening rules that women have to adhere to in society. But this fine line that women have to walk is dangerously toxic and concerning for any kind of mental stability. With young girls today still being taught that purity should be their defining characteristic and that sex makes a girl disposable, there is no wonder that many mental illnesses have ties with some sort of sexual component. Depression is accompanied by a loss of sexual desire, but this symptom is more common for men than for women. Meanwhile, manic episodes and borderline personality disorder are classified, in part, by casual sex, which, as stated before, is defined mainly for women. In a society where sex has become a weapon, women are being cut down for something natural to them by men who are able to wield this sword freely. And the toxicity has tainted women's own expectations of each other. Women must internalize their own sexual needs so much that they turn their own self-doubt into criticism of other women's behavior, only giving power to the patriarchal ideas.

The men in these two novels represent extreme examples that a woman may meet in her life. However, just because they are uncommon does not mean that they are not representative of a larger trend. Buddy's assumptions that Esther is his and his alone is still a common thought. Women

haters like Marco are rampant and hide under their “nice guy” facades until it is too late and too dangerous for a woman to leave. His woman-hating qualities have lasted the years since *The Bell Jar* was published, but this type of thinking has been brought to the forefront of social knowledge with the Me Too and Why I Stayed movements on social media. Eric represents the thought process concerning the women who have sex and those who do not, the idea that women who are readily open to sexual encounters are unworthy of actual love and affection, while those who are deemed pure enough to be in relationships should remain chaste and loyal. And Kaysen’s admitting doctor shows just how powerful a man in authority can be, even when making questionable decisions.

Expectations and Roles of Women in Society

Kaysen and Plath both write on the expectations that society had established for women and on how falling short in these specific areas meant failing at life. They had been brought up with the idea that certain actions and abilities were required in order to succeed in life. This included not only character traits that represent femininity, such as grace, etiquette, poise, and composure, but also physical activities that were deemed the hobbies of the affluent and successful.

Kaysen summed up her feelings about the situation succinctly: “My chronic feelings of emptiness and boredom came from the fact that I was living a life based on my incapacities.... As far as I could see, life demanded skills I didn’t have” (154-55). She could not ski, play tennis, go to school for any subject other than English or biology, or even plan to go to college. She was unable to provide a reasonable explanation for these feelings of inadequacy, yet no explanation available would appease society and what others thought she should do. But it was not only the fact that she was unable to do tasks; it was also the fact that she did not want to. This left Kaysen out of her peer group at an early age. She knew she wanted no part of the life that society was planning for her. With no desire to go to school or get married and be trapped by a husband—which was, in her eyes, just a smaller version of the overall patriarchal society that had already ensnared her—Kaysen was left dumfounded. If she did not want the lifestyle expected of her, then the only other choice would be to have nothing.

When she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and sent to McLean Hospital, Kaysen willingly assumed the role that society and her family gave her: the role of the family lunatic. She describes two kinds of families, based on her experiences with the other girls on the ward: those who kept paying to keep the person in, and those who wanted to prove that no one in the family was crazy. This speaks to the idea of how different families would act to adapt to the societal expectations they felt themselves. Some families decided to hide the family lunatic away to keep them out of sight, knowing that people were aware of the lunatic’s presence but also making the point to say, “We aren’t crazy;

she is the crazy one” (95). This need to define the boundaries between the mentally ill shows that families were proud to keep their own secrets away but left the young girl in the hospital forced to wonder where her place could possibly be in society.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther promptly addresses the societal expectations that she knows she does not meet. During her summer in New York, all Esther could feel was a sense of drifting, as though all she had worked for suddenly meant nothing, “all the little successes I’d totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing.... I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls like me all over America” (2). Esther knows that her editorial job at the *Ladies’ Day* magazine was an amazing opportunity, something she had fervently hoped for before she had gotten the news and gone to New York itself. However, the experience is accompanied by a sense of dread and foreboding. Esther realizes that all of the hard work she has done in college, getting good grades and scholarships, is the only thing that she feels truly talented at, yet “that era was coming to an end” (90). The ability to win scholarships or prizes is not a skill valued by the patriarchal society unless it is a prize for a pie at the local fair or church luncheon. Esther ultimately feels lost and unanchored, unsure of the next step to take.

Esther dreams of a career in journalism, like her boss Jay Cee has, but it would mean a life living alone and without intimate companionship. This idea of having someone to depend on is something that appeals to Esther just enough so she considers marriage, but she also understands that she is expected to be a mother and wife. Her view of marriage is bleak, a drastic and harsh end to the life she had worked on. Plath writes,

[Marriage] would mean getting up at seven and cooking [her husband] eggs and bacon... [and] after he’d left for work to wash up the dirty plates and make the bed, and then when he came home after a lively fascinating day he’s expect a big dinner, and I’d spend the evening washing up even more dirty plates till I fell into bed, utterly exhausted. This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s. (99)

Esther was seeking the same level of gratification from marriage that she had gotten from her life so far, but the marriages she had seen and been privy to had been anything but fulfilling for the wife.

At the time when Plath was writing and Kaysen was hospitalized, it was extremely difficult for a woman to have a family and career. Steps had been made to help women get into the workforce and develop a life outside of the home, but some of these women were still shunned. Often, women in the workforce were single and without kids. If a mother also wanted to work, she had to have the approval of her husband,

a hard-fought battle that, more times than not, ended in a brutal loss. The general mindset was that a woman was allowed to do one or the other: have a career or have a family. They were mutually exclusive lifestyles. The inability to decide meant that all of the paths become unavailable, a struggle to choose even one of them. To women like Plath and Kaysen, this was a conundrum that kept them trapped inside their own minds. The constant debate over which to choose led to an idea of inferiority to those other women who had already made their decision.

Mental Health and What the Authors Experienced

The choices forced upon them and the inability to find a fulfilling option led to a troubling spiral for Kaysen and Plath. The more time they spent inside their own minds considering how to fit into a society built against them, the more their minds started to struggle with the concept of existence. At some point, their minds were so taxed that the brain began to develop unhealthy ways of coping with the world, brought on by past trauma as well as by the struggle of becoming a woman in society. These disastrous coping mechanisms led to the revelation of mental health disorders. While these disorders caused chaos in both women's lives for a time, it began to make sense why they developed at the end of their adolescent years. It became a way to cope with the world, but Kaysen and Plath both learned that their mental illness could serve as a way to combat the unjust and cruel world that they were being forced into.

The trouble and uncertainty regarding which path to choose in life led to a visible mental decline in Esther. At the beginning of the book, readers can already see signs of disassociation, insecurity, and depression. Esther remarks at one point that the last time she had been truly happy was before her father died when she was nine years old, which is a concerning long time considering that Esther was nearly in her twenties. The sadness and misery had made themselves at home, long enough that Esther does not notice them settling in until it is too late. This led to the sudden realization that she was unable to plan beyond the next day. Esther says, "I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three...nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth" (145). Throughout her downward spiral, Esther's depression had gotten so bad that it seemed as though there was no path for her to go forward. She has already established that no one plan—single but successful like her boss, Jay Cee, or married with children but no career, like neighbor Dodo Conway—seems to fit her idea of a happy life. At that point, this realization is simply feeding her mental illness, fulfilling the beliefs that society had taught her. If she has no plan to fit in some specified part of society, especially that of a caring mother and wife, then there is no hope. If there is no hope, then there is no reason to be alive.

Esther finds that killing oneself is much harder than it seems. She tries to cut her wrists but is unable to. The skin on her wrist seems too innocent and defenseless, but Esther also reaches a crucial realization. She says, "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse...but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (*TBJ*, 176). This discovery suggests that the thing that she wants to kill, the thing that Esther wants gone, is not an inherent part of herself. It is something that has been embedded in her: the ideas of society that have managed to infiltrate her very being, attacking her from the inside. The world and institutions that are supposed to care for her have instead begun their sabotage, unwilling to let her step outside of the social norms.

Plath aimed her writing at the world, establishing that her mental deterioration was not caused by a particular weakness that society and most physicians assumed of adolescent females. She makes the point that it was something with a specific cause found in the world around her. All signs in the novel point to the culprit being the expectations pushed on a young woman who was unsure if she wanted what life was forcing upon her. Yet what is more terrifying than the actual mental breakdown, suicide attempt with pills, and hospitalization is the attitude that the public took towards sickness. Whether it be physical (like the ptomaine poisoning that Esther and the other girls received at the *Ladies' Day* luncheon) or mental, the prevailing answer to illness in the novel is to ignore it and forget it. *Ladies' Day* offered the women who were sick a generalized "Get Well Soon" card and a book published by the magazine. It was swept under the rug and the apology was simply a precaution because, as Doreen put it, "[*Ladies' Day*] can't afford to have the lot of you running around saying you got poisoned at *Ladies' Day*" (58). Society viewed illness like a small child: if no one can see it, then it is not really there.

Esther's mother is the most concerning character of all regarding illness. She seems to take Esther's sickness as a personal offense, continuously concerned that it is her fault. But Mother also does not seem to believe that Esther is truly sick until she tries to kill herself. The madness in her daughter could upset the precarious balance and façade that she has established in the neighborhood. She treats Esther's electroshock therapy as something that her daughter would actually readily volunteer for, remarking, "I knew my baby wasn't like that... Like all those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital... I knew you'd decide to be alright again" (174). Mother does sense in some way that the electroshock therapy, and possibly the causes for it, is a damaging and traumatic experience. But she holds to the idea that sickness is something that must be physical in order to be valid, and anything else is simply a choice that a person has made.

Kaysen addresses her mental illness with a level of self-awareness that offers a striking view into her inner

turmoil. She describes it as an oxymoron: “my misfortune—or salvation—to be at times perfectly conscious of my misinterpretations of reality” (*GI*, 41). She is aware of how her mental health and the issues that it causes can manifest in her life. The confusion in this time of her life is shown in the unsure chronology or logical order of *Girl*, *Interrupted*, and this offers an effective demonstration of how mental illness affected the adolescent identity that Kaysen had created.

Instead of having a cohesive mindset and solid foundation of adulthood that most people find in their adolescent years, Kaysen was sent into the hospital with a non-linear, insecure, and ambiguous identity, and exited with roughly the same.

But she was then able to turn to writing to express how this identity was a way to fight the general animosity aimed at her by a society where she did not fit: “My hunger, my thirst, my loneliness and boredom and fear were all weapons aimed at my enemy, the world. They didn’t matter a whit to the world, of course, and they tormented me, but I got a gruesome satisfaction from my sufferings. They proved my existence” (42). Kaysen acknowledges that she knew that the world did not care about her pain, but it was her way to prove to herself, no one else, that she was alive. It was an outward way to show that an internal condition existed and was present, that it was not just a figment of her imagination or an excuse to step away from the world. Nobody knew that she was in pain. Nobody knew that she was hurting herself. She says, “Part of the point was that nobody knew about my suffering. If people knew and admired—or abominated—me, something important would be lost” (153). The sense of importance was related to the maintenance of self, of a sense of belief that she was justified to feel these things without anyone else telling her that she was wrong to express herself.

Self-harm was not the ideal way for Kaysen to express herself or remind herself that she could feel and existed. Yet she was not sure of any other way yet. This was the course of action that seemed to make the most sense. It was what could allow her to prove her existence as she moved through a society that expected so much but offered so little support. Kaysen felt as though she was being ignored by the world and set up for failure. How was she to fight for her own space, to make her voice heard, to establish her own life? How could she prove that she lived in a time when everyone wished to ignore her existence, simply because they feared that her own insanity was a possibility for them, too? She wrote about her experiences. She turned from using hunger, thirst, loneliness, boredom, and self-harm as her weapons to using words and stories and anecdotes of herself and the other women who survived alongside her.

Conclusion

Through these two works, Plath and Kaysen were able to show that mental illnesses were not all that defined them, and certainly did not limit their ability to succeed. While society and the medical establishment had stepped into

a more progressive era of treatment and rehabilitation for those with mental illness, the treatments used for Plath and Kaysen were frightening. Two young girls, who desperately needed help, were subjected to the same societal expectations in the hospital, a world that was supposed to keep them safe and heal them. The establishment treated them not as humans but rather as something fragile that did not understand its own mind and needs.

This stigma has faded today, but the patriarchal view still holds a tight rein over the medical institutions in the world, especially those for the mentally ill. Women’s mental illness may not be categorized solely under “hysteria” anymore, but the lasting effects of male physicians’ beliefs about the female gender being more fragile and susceptible are still lingering in the depths of medical books and practice. This is impacting the world far outside of just mental hospitals, but also for regular doctors who may dismiss their female patients as simply being anxious or looking too deeply into their illness and ignorantly refusing to believe that something may actually be wrong. In an article written for *The Guardian*, Gabrielle Jackson shows that this trend is still permeating research of medical practice, writing, “Diseases presenting differently in women are often missed or misdiagnosed, and those affecting mainly women remain largely a mystery: understudied, undertreated and frequently misdiagnosed or undiagnosed.” In the world of mental illness, a prime example of this trend is seen in the case of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. A young girl with ADHD may simply be called a daydreamer, disorganized, or simply chatty. Ignoring the early warning signs of women with this disorder leaves these girls more prone to eating disorders, obesity, and low self-esteem. Kaysen and Plath wanted to alert the world to this problem, and both books alert young women to the dangers that they may face when they step forward, and also encourage them to use their voices to tell others to advocate for their own health.

They also shed light on the inherent misogyny surrounding the world in general. As mentioned above, great strides have been made in the world for gender equality, and women across the globe are speaking out to fight against oppression, such as the gender pay gap or laws still governing women’s bodies. Yet the world of America in the 1960’s and 1970’s was a frightening place. Women’s rights made massive advancements with cases such as *Roe v. Wade* and the women’s liberation movement, but women still felt vulnerable and under pressure to find a safe space to exist. Speaking out in society was terrifying for many women. Mental health was not readily discussed or known about in society, leaving behind those women who suffered as their peers moved forward with other necessary movements. Ladies with mental health issues still needed a weapon of their own, something to fight the patriarchal rules that had governed and silenced females for so long.

This is why *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted* are such powerful pieces of literature. Not only did they enlighten others to the horrors and troubles they faced, but they also were able to shed light on the gendered perspective that the rest of society was holding onto so tightly. Kaysen viewed her time in the mental hospital as a sort of respite from the forces of the outside world, while Plath viewed mental illness as a trap inside her own mind. The reaction to their diagnosis was starkly different, as was the support that they were offered from family.

Yet both of these women used their perspectives and experiences to speak out against the stigmas surrounding mental illness, while also offering up their traumas, heartbreak, and pain as weapons against the world surrounding them. Plath wrote first through Esther, a thinly veiled version of herself, before continuing to write poetry and other books that were unflinchingly honest. She was willing to fight the demons of her mind in order to speak her truth, though unfortunately she lost the mental battle that she had survived for thirty years. Kaysen lived through her darkest and most depressing times, creating a novel that spoke about the same era that Plath depicts, but with almost thirty years of experience and thought preceding it. Still, both women helped to establish works that were greatly influential to the literary genre surrounding adolescent, especially female adolescent, mental health. This genre survives and thrives in the young adult section of many bookstores as women, and now men, are daring to step forward to speak about their own struggles. The current epidemic of adolescent and young adult mental health issues has kept these readers coming back to books such as *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted*. These young adults who are preparing to face the world are looking for sources of hope, something to tell them that their mental illness and struggles do not have to be their defining factor. People are beginning to speak out against the establishment and societal rules that have haunted them and forced them into darkness. Women are fighting to take down the system that has kept them quieter and tamer than their male counterparts.

This change is largely owed to Plath, who began to give women hope and courage to write about their personal experiences from a more personal point of view, and Kaysen, who helped to keep the genre and hope alive. They demanded to be seen and heard, shouting that their mental disorders were not what defined them, that society would not force them to be something that they were not. They learned how to use their own demons as weapons against the systematic patriarchy that threatened to drown and silence them.

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