

## INNER CONFLICT AND HIDDEN MEANINGS IN SYLVIA PLATH'S NOVEL THE BELL JAR

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The article is devoted to the study of writings of the American writer and poetess, who is considered one of the founders of the genre of “confessional poetry” in English-language literature, Sylvia Plath, on the example of the analysis of hidden meanings in the novel “The Bell Jar”. The biographical and feminist approaches are applied. The main leitmotif of the novel is highlighted – the search for female identity within the framework of the traditional “male” culture. In a world where men rule and establish order, women are portrayed as belonging to a minority opposed to the majority of men. A semantic analysis of the work is presented.

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath; the novel “The Bell Jar”; implications; feminism.

Sylvia Plath was an American novelist and poetess who worked in the genre of Confessional Poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Confessionalism was a reaction to the depersonalized, academic poetry of writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Confessional Poetry draws upon the autobiographical experiences of the poetess and Sylvia Plath managed to transform her own experiences into art. In her works she emphasized intimate and unflattering details about herself in order to confess something to the reader. Despite her early death Sylvia Plath made a significant contribution to the literature. For 10 years such impressive works as ‘*Colossus and others poems*’ (1960), ‘*Ariel*’ (1965), ‘*Crossing the Water*’ (1971), ‘*Winter Trees*’ (1972) appeared and posthumously brought her the fame and status of one of the greatest writers in the American literature. In 1982, Plath won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems*, which made the poet the first who received the honor posthumously. Her popularity spread not only across west world, but also turned into a peculiar myth representing the tragic fate of the rebellious female poet in the patriarchal world ruled by men. Her destiny in literature was paradoxical in many ways. Just two weeks after the publication her first and last novel *The Bell Jar* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963, she committed suicide by sleeping pills and gas inhalation.

Strongly autobiographical, the novel *The Bell Jar* describes the mental breakdown and eventual recovery of a young college girl Esther Greenwood. The plot parallels Plath’s own breakdown and an attempt of suicide caused by severe depression and then psychiatric hospitalization in 1953 after spending a month as a guest editor in the *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York. In many ways, this novel is a feminist text, centered around struggles of a young

woman who cannot reach her goals in a male-dominated society. In American criticism, there are two main approaches to the study of the works of Sylvia Plath – biographical and feminist. The fact of ending her life by committing suicide could be seen as a dramatic point to which her life and art work strived inevitably [2, p. 124]. As a part of this theory *The Bell Jar* and all her poems appear to be a tiny step to the fateful end. In the context of this approach the novel and the poems written during the last months of the poetess's life are considered as biographical notes of the mental suffering and as the proof that she had status of victim in the patriarchal society and particularly of her husband. However, besides these biographical similarities, in the novel you can find the significant layer of mythological parallels with the crucial text and the images of patriarchal culture [1, p. 336].

The major topic in *The Bell Jar* is searching for feminine identity through the traditional male society. Women are shown to belong to marginalized minority opposing the majority of the white middle-class men. In the world where men govern and establish the rules, women have the one role which is to keep house and raise children. The reticence is the essential woman's feature and this makes Esther felling down. Analyzing retrospectively her own depressed condition, the heroine recognizes: '*The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.*' [4, p. 11] But not only the woman understands her silence, but also in the man's consciousness the woman is the voiceless creature. Thus, Doreen, the talkative and sassy friend of Esther, stops talking in front of Lenny Shepard. '*He kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human.*' [4, p.8] This zoological comparison emphasizes that for Lenny the woman is like a female animal trying to attract the male one. From the authoritarian masculine point of view, the woman can't say anything worthwhile, she just imitates the man's speech. The fact that the man keeps the role of a leader and a ruler proves not only Doreen's submissive silence, but also Lenny's surname – Shepard, which refers to the man's role of a chief, a shepherd, who is looking for his '*flock*' (a shepherd means a person who moves and cares for sheep, or leads people somewhere).

It should be noted that the image of the man as the animal pursuing the woman-victim can be found in some poems of Plath. One of Plath's best poems is '*Pursuit*' (1957), in which the poetess successfully used the symbol of the Panther in order to illustrate male dominance. The motive of passion arising between a man and a woman unfolds through images of the animal pursuit.

In the novel the motive of the carnivorous passion-violence sounds as the leitmotiv defining the relationship between a man and a woman. The crucial episode where you can significantly see it is where Esther defends herself

from angry Marco who tried to rape her. Therefore, Esther's unhealthy will to be invisible turns into the suicidal condition. This idea in many aspects represents the feminist concept about the invisibility of women in the masculine culture.

We should bear in mind, that the episode mentioned above is the key moment in the narrative, because the incident with Marco happens at the last night of the Esther's presence in New-York, after that she comes back home where her psychological degradation starts. In the novel, standing quietly in the doorway Esther sees a man wearing an immaculate white suit, a yellow satin tie with a bright stickpin, illuminating the room. She couldn't take her eyes off that stickpin. This tiny detail is exaggerated in the Esther's mind turning into some kind of hypnotizing eye beckoning her against her will. But then the light emitting from this pin suddenly disappears '*leaving a dewdrop on a field of gold*' [4, p. 54]. As if in a trance she follows the owner of the brilliant stickpin. This attraction seems irrational. Like a sleepwalker she is going toward the light. The fact that the heroine follows the sparkle of the pin highlights the absurdity of this attraction which is probably emerging due to the natural strict deterministic behavior rather than her personal aspirations.

The Marco's appearance and behavior brings to mind the animal's habits '*the spark in Marco's eyes extinguished, and they went black*' [4, p. 57]. Unlike Esther who doesn't want to dance and prefer being silent and standing still, Marco is portrayed through constant moving. At lexical level the episode is rich with motion verbs such as *to bow, to encircle, to bend, to grip, to maneuver, to dance, to hook, to jerk, to slide*. It is remarkable that already at the beginning of the episode Marco's moves are aggressive. He takes away Esther's glass and pulls to dance squeezing her hand to bruises. Being involved in the dance against her will the heroine mentions '*I seemed to be riveted to him, ... without any will or knowledge of my own*' and '*moving as he moved*' [4, p. 55]. Beast images in the Marco's episode work as an effect of reality dehumanization in the Esther's mind. A regular party turns out into grotesque sinister action where people lose their human form. Marco's smile reminds Esther of the snake which she saw at the zoo. Esther recalls her knocking on the terrarium glass and the snake opened jaws and started beating on the glass as if it were smiling. This flashback has some connections between the snake's image as temptation, sin, danger and Marco's image. In the context of that flashback Marco's pin turns into a snake's attribute. Esther is attracted by its shine '*keeps tapping a glassy facet*' [4, p. 56]. Therefore, an evanescent gesture spawns a whole chain of associations where ordinary details have mythological implications.

A dimensional aspect of the scene is very important in describing the setting. It is remarkable that it is in the garden where Marco and Esther come af-

ter dancing, Marco attacks Esther aggressively. The idea of the literary chronotope is implied by the other. The garden is traditionally associated with the Garden of Eden as a place of a heavenly existence with no sin. And a bunch of snakes' images having to do with Marco's figure only proves it. In the novel the garden turns out to be a place of the heroine's slaughter who tried to challenge the traditional representation of a perfect love. The slaughter scene in the garden is built on the bible plot on Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden dared to break the God's ban. While beating Esther Marco literally tramples her in the mud. Lying on the ground the heroine feels mud squirming through her fingers and the mud oozed and adjusting itself to her shoulder blades [4, p. 57]. The action develops according to the principle of curtailing the biblical plot about the human creation out of clay. By Marco's will who personifies patriarchal power of man over woman, Esther happens to be mixed with the ground or the material out of which the God created a human. The Marco's phrase also sounds symbolic – '*your dress is black and the dirt is black as well*' [4, p. 57]. We should also note that Marco levels Esther with the ground not only by action, but also by words turning her into nothing and emphasizing invisibility, the trait of character which women in the patriarchal world are attributed to.

As this episode abounds with allusions to texts on patriarchal theme, the most productive approach is to consider the name of Marco has some implication. The name Marco might have the implication of legendary traveller Marco Polo, so it personifies the 'male's' world of travelling and danger [3]. At the party where Esther meets Marco she feels '*yellowed than ever*' [4, p. 55]. Trying to identify herself Esther sometimes sees her own face in an unexpected perspective, either she sees the reflection of the Chinese woman '*a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman*' [4, p. 11] or of the Indian '*like a sick Indian*' [4, p. 59]. In that context it's important that Marco Polo was one of the first European travellers who explored Asia and China and described the Asian's life and customs from the perspective of a white man being some kind of a forerunner of colonists strived from West to East. In the novel Marco is a tall and dark guy with '*a slightly longer hair*' [4, p. 55]. His foreign name and appearance let us see the hint on Italian archetype what we also can consider as a veiled reference to the image of fearless Venetian traveller.

In the novel Marco places the pin with a diamond on the Esther's palm and she hides it in the evening bag '*I slipped it quickly into my imitation jet bead evening bag and looked around*' [4, p. 55]. Esther loses her bag during the fight with Marco. She tries to defeat herself by hitting his leg by the heel and then punches him in the nose. Because of the bleeding nose Marco falls behind Esther but then threatens her again demanding his diamond. Esther an-

swers that the pin is in the bag that is somewhere in the garden mud. Marco kneels down and convulsively starts searching for the black bag in the dirt. The heroine watches him searching it: *'I lift Marco on his hands and knees, scrabbling in the darkness for another, smaller darkness that hid the light of his diamond from his furious eyes'* [4, p. 58]. Double darkness as an attribute of the female's world turns out to be a trap for the man. Here we can see how double semantic of female space is revealed, so typical for Plath's poetics. In the poem the darkness of the garden is not only the place where the woman is humiliated by the man, but also a revenge locus where the man loses his treasure.

We can also see a parody interpretation of patriarchal Christian symbolism in the number of girls who come from the province to work for internships in New York. The collective image of 12 girls may be interpreted as a reference to 12 apostles. As well as 12 apostles who turn from commoners into guardians of divine truth, 12 young provincials having tried the shine of the high fashion, beauty and advertising industry, they become perfect beauties from glossy magazine covers. The location itself, the advertising banquet where gourmet dishes are served, may be overseen as a reference to Last Supper. Meaningful that exactly Doreen is absent at the banquet who in terms of public morality of the US in the 1950s belongs to vicious women for entering into a premarital relationship with a man. Thus, 'bad' Doreen is contrasted to her 'good' friends. So it echoes the biblical image of Judas.

To sum up, it's obvious that the novel *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath portrays images of patriarchal culture infiltrating them into the modern context and applying them to the 'woman's world'. As well as in the poetic texts, in the novel we see the semantic contrast between 'other' men's myths and 'their own' female text where those myths are subject to ironic rethinking and parody. The analysis of the novel in the context of Plath's writings lets us see the points of contact where the tense dialogue between the author's modern prosaic texts and patriarchal culture mythologemes takes place.

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