

A Comparative Psychological Analysis of ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ by Virginia Woolf & ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

The psychological elements in Virginia Woolf's and Sylvia Plath's works are highly preoccupied with mental health, identity, and the pressures exerted by society, particularly on women. In both writers' plotlines, the complexity of the character's inner lives are expressed, through narrations, the significant events occurring in their lives related to mental illnesses and societal norms of that age. Much of Woolf's work is written in the Stream-Of-Consciousness style, often tempered with much of her psychological strife, forged from such personal traumas as the death of her parents and sexual abuse. This research paper delves into the psychological depths of the protagonists of the two renowned works of both the authors, ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ by Virginia Woolf and ‘The Bell Jar’ by Sylvia Plath. On one hand, ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ reveal how an intricate relationship between mental health and the female experience was depicted by Woolf and how she used her characters as alter egos to voice her feelings of terror and inadequacy. Her work is a criticism of the oppressive suffocating constraint that undermines the mental health of human beings. We observe a keen reflection of Woolf herself in her work. Similarly in ‘The Bell Jar’, Sylvia Plath has written a semi-autobiographical account, detailing her aspect of depression and bouts of identity crises. Woolf and Plath used their works of literature to discuss and describe psychological realities, hence their significant contributions to discussing mental health and women's issues in literature. Their stories do not simply enlighten us about their struggles but relate to much larger themes of trauma, identity, and a self-endeavor to know one's self which is rather important to students of psychological literature.

Keywords: literature, mental health, stream-of-consciousness.

1. Introduction

Adeline Virginia Woolf was one of the most distinctive writers of English Literature. She became one of the central subjects of the 1870s movement of feminist criticism. Her works have attracted millions of readers worldwide and have received widespread commentary for inspiring feminism. She was best known for her works, especially ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ (1925) and ‘The Lighthouse’ (1927).

According to a research, experts now believe she suffered from bipolar disorder, which includes severe depression episodes and hypomanic dysphoria. Although she experienced more severe episodes in between, the three main crises of her illness occurred in the summer of 1895, May 1904, and July 1913. At the age of thirteen, she experienced her first episode. She was obliged to quit keeping her diary,

which she had begun four years prior and spent more than six months recovering. Following a severe breakdown in 1897, she claimed that life was extremely difficult for her and that she would require elephant-like thick skin to get through it—something the author undoubtedly thought she lacked. Troubled by mental illness throughout her life, Woolf was institutionalized several times and attempted suicide twice before drowning herself. She used the Stream-of-Consciousness writing style which is one of the most challenging narrative techniques in writing. She focused on the character rather than on the plot.

Another American poet well-known for her dark themes, Sylvia Plath, also experienced a downward spiral in her early years. A combination of her father's complicated feelings, career setbacks, and external pressures to fit in with the prevailing expectations for women led to her eventual diagnosis of clinical depression. Her illness worsened despite a brief remission because of her tense relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes. Regarding her responsibilities as a wife and mother in the home, there was ongoing conflict. As a result of her wish to have a child and her desire to pursue writing as a vocation, she felt pressured to conform to a gender role that ultimately led to her suicide in 1963. She is associated with the genre of confessional poetry and is best known for *'The Colossus and other poems'* (1960) and *'The Bell Jar'* a semi-autobiographical novel, published in 1963. The book has events from her own life that reveals how isolated a person feels while suffering a breakdown. She used to picture her world and the people in it as seen through the disturbing lens of *'The Bell Jar'*. She described her novel as 'an autobiographical apprentice work' which she had to write in order to free herself from the past.

Plath used her novel *'The Bell Jar'* to highlight the issues of women in the workforce during the 1950s. She strongly believed in women's abilities to be writers while society forced them to fulfill their traditional roles.

Chaos is an unpredictable physical occurrence, which is beyond any ascertainable rules of the physical universe. Chaos refers to the condition of confusion that existed before everything else. Chaos, here, means trauma, the external environment that the character is in, and internal, it means the flow of disturbing continuous thoughts. Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath were the mystics of chaos. Their works succeed in reflecting the reality as many and dislocated, as the many feelings and visions one always has in a hyper-realism way.

2. 'Mrs.Dalloway' by Virginia Woolf:

In 'Mrs.Dalloway', the psychological aspect of the main character, Clarissa, is marked by introspection, memory and the tension between societal expectations and individual desires. The story takes place over the course of a single day as Clarissa prepares for a party, but this seemingly trivial event serves as a backdrop for the complex emotional and psychological problems she confronts.

Clarissa Dalloway's mind is constantly haunted by her past. Particularly her decision to marry Richard Dalloway instead of her more passionate suitor, Sally Seton. She is acutely aware of her place in society—her role as a wife, mother, and hostess—and the accompanying expectation. Mrs. Woolf portrays Clarissa as someone who feels both at home in this role and trapped by it, demonstrating the tension between societal expectations and her personal fulfillment. Clarissa's identity is fragmented.

Woolf uses the Stream – of – Consciousness narrative technique to reveal the inner workings of Clarissa's mind, blending past and present thoughts. This allows deeper exploration of mental states, specially memory and the passage of time influence in Clarissa's identity. She reflects on her youthful

desires, the choices she made and the ways in which time has distanced her from her past self, and gendering a sense of loss.

Clarissa's psychological state is also intertwined with the trauma of WWI. The novel presents the juxtaposition of Clarissa's relatively privileged life with the horrors of war exemplified by the character of Septimus Smith, a war veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Septimus' mental deterioration and eventual suicide highlight the devastating impact of war on the psyche and contrast with Clarissa's more subtle psychological struggle. However, both characters demonstrate how society's expectation—whether of femininity, health, or normalcy—can exacerbate internal struggles.

3. 'The Bell Jar' by Sylvia Plath:

'The Bell Jar' by Sylvia Plath is about Esther Greenwood, a young woman who grapples depression, the search for identity, and the crushing weight of societal expectations. This novel is considered a semi-autobiographical drawing/deriving from Plath's own struggles with mental illness and her experience of being institutionalized.

Much like Clarissa Dalloway, Esther feels disconnected from the roles society expects her to play—woman, wife, and mother—and from her own desires and ambitions. Throughout the novel, Esther struggles to reconcile her intellectual ambitions with gendered limitations forced on her by society. Her depression becomes a metaphor for her feeling of being trapped in a world that offers no fulfilling possibilities for women. The title 'Bell Jar' symbolizes her suffocating mental state, in which she feels both detached from reality and overwhelmed by it.

Esther's mental illness isolates her from her friends and family, just as Clarissa experiences alienation despite her social life. The disconnect between how Esther perceives herself and how others perceive her, fuels her sense of isolation. Her downwards spiral into depression is marked by a growing sense of alienation from her body, mind and surroundings symbolized by the oppressive Bell Jar. This image encapsulates Esther's psychological state: trapped, suffocating and unable to escape her own mind.

Esther's crisis is escalated by her awareness of the narrow roles available to women in the 1950s. As she observes the lives of other women around her, she feels both repelled by their conformity to traditional roles and appalled by the prospect of such a future. Her depression is partly a response to this limited vision of womanhood and her inability to seek meaning in it. Esther's experience highlights the oppressive nature of social norms for women during this time and the psychic tone it takes on those who cannot or will not conform.

4. Mental health and institutionalization:

Like Septimus in 'Mrs. Dalloway', Esther's mental illness leads to a dramatic counter with institutionalization. However, while Septimus' trauma was related to war, Esther's breakdown reflects the broader social pressures on women. Her time in a psychiatric hospital is marked by her sense of helplessness and powerlessness and the clinical treatment she receives only aggravates her feelings of alienation. The novel mocks at the medical treatment of mental illness, particularly the use of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and the way women's mental health was often misunderstood or mishandled by medical professionals.'

5. Themes of mental health in 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Bell Jar'

Both 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Bell Jar' delve into the minds of their protagonists. Clarissa Dalloway

and Esther Greenwood, respectively. These novels explore the intersection of mental illness, identity and societal expectations. Through their distinctive narrative techniques, both Woolf and Plath depict nuanced psychological portrait of women, navigating their personal crises in the face of external pressure.

6. Psychological Parallels:

Mental illness as a reflection of societal pressure:

Both Clarissa and Esther experience psychological distress as result of social expectations. While Clarissa's struggles were more existential and tied to her past choices, Esther's depression more acute and linked to her inability to fit into the limited roles available to be met.

The protagonist, Clarissa, feels forced to play the parts of hostess and wife. In her existential reflections, she writes with a sense of deep isolation:

"She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown. This being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway."

This quotation illustrates how her husband absorbs her identity, resulting in a crisis of self-awareness.

In 'The Bell Jar', the title itself becomes a logo for how social conventions stifle Esther:

"I felt like I was dressed under a bell jar, stewing in my own sour air."

The bell jar signifies Esther's sadness and the oppressive social forces that smother her individuality.

Plath criticizes women's failure to pursue goals without being characterized as 'unfeminine' or 'unstable'. Only when Esther begins to regain her story and distance herself from these expectations can she begin healing.

Both characters are tormented with the question of identity, but for Clarissa it is more of compromising with her past and present selves while for Esther it is about finding a place in a world that offers little or no hope for women like her.

Stream of consciousness and subjectivity:

Both novels employed techniques that highlight the subjective nature of their protagonists' psychological states. Woolf's use of the Stream of Consciousness technique in 'Mrs. Dalloway' allows for a fluid representation of Clarissa's inner life, blurring the boundaries between reality, memory and thought. Plath, on the other hand, uses a straightforward narrative in 'The Bell Jar' conveying Esther's subjective experiences with great immediacy and clarity specially in her description of depression, alienation and the oppressive sense of being trapped in her own mind.

Clarissa's thoughts often switch between the past and the present, which serves as an open window into her inner world and how that influences her outlook on relationships and life. For example:

"She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on."

This is a paradigm that portrays the contrast in the definition of Clarissa's self: she is both alive and aloof, torn between her past and present selves.

As a reflection of Esther's mental state, her story alternates between moments of acute clarity and melancholy gloom. She talks about her incapacity to relate to life at one point:

"I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to."

Her uncensored thoughts capture the unadulterated subjectivity of her despair and her disengagement from social norms.

Impact of trauma:

Both novels examine the psychological scars left by trauma. For Clarissa, this trauma is indirect—her experiences with death, social pressures and the lingering effects of the war on others. For Esther, trauma is more direct and personal—her depression, suicidal thoughts and experiences with mental health institutions. Both works critic the inability of society to adequately address or comprehend mental health, particularly for women.

Clarissa experiences existential crises that are similar to Septimus' trauma, although not being a direct victim of war. She considers this after hearing of his passing:

"She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away."

This instance demonstrates how suffering, whether social or personal, can inspire deep reflection on the purpose of life.

In Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar,' the claustrophobic sense of despair and existential anxiety is poignantly portrayed through the protagonist, Esther Greenwood. Esther expresses her feelings of isolation and entrapment with the metaphor of the bell jar.

"I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to."

This image represents her mental condition as isolated and overwhelmed.

Feminist Underpinnings:

Both 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Bell Jar' can be read through a feminist lens, exploring the pressures placed on women to conform to certain roles. Both Clarissa and Esther are highly aware of the limited options available to them, and their psychological struggles reflect their dissatisfaction with these confines. While Clarissa's mental anguish stems more from existential questions about the life she has chosen, Esther's psychological breakdown is more overtly tied to her rejection of traditional gender roles.

Clarissa's parties, though outwardly very mundane, are a form of expression for her whereby she can express her identity and build up a place where otherwise distinct voices can meet. These parties help her exercise power and disprove the idea that women could only be good for the domestic sphere:

"She felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together."

Her parties are essentially a way of fighting against social disintegration and seeking meaning in a restrictively controlled society.

Esther questions the purpose of her life and the options open to her, showing her existential uneasiness. This worry is made worse by the need to fit in with society's expectations. She feels stuck when she considers the responsibilities that women play in society:

"I was supposed to be having the time of my life."

The contrast between her desires and expectations makes her internal conflict worse, which also underlines her anxiety about making decisions that cannot be undone. Because of this tension, Esther's experience is a moving examination of despair and existential distress, mirroring a larger battle with identity and the dread of failing.

Suicidal contemplation and Death as Liberation:

For Clarissa and Septimus, suicide is viewed as a means of coping with the pressures of existence. For Clarissa, death is broader and more abstract than that, while Septimus' self-annihilation may be seen as a rebellion against the repressive encroachments of civilization and psychiatry. Clarissa ponders her death quite often, and it is never a question of defeat for her, but rather an option or a transformation.

After hearing about Septimus' suicide, Clarissa struggles with her wish to mourn him and her relief at his death, thinking that she understands his shame and his rebellion against the intolerable world. Death to her is also transiting the boundary of life but is also an assertion of one's sovereignty.

Upon hearing of Septimus' suicide, Clarissa reflects,

"Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate... there was an embrace in death."

The terror of experiences in Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar' is effectively related to the issues of suicidal thought and death as a release. With Esther being unable to breathe freely in her despair, coupled with social obligations, her mental condition becomes more depressing day after day. She had suicidal thoughts to run away from the oppressive reality of life. There is also a kind of relief in Esther's suicidal thought. Death appears to her as an exit from the constant social pressures that weaken her sense of self, and also an end to suffering:

"I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be the world itself... and it was too much."

In this way, death appeals to her because it offers her an imagined autonomy and release from the restrictive confines of existence. This viewpoint demonstrates how her quest for purpose and identity causes her to view death as a possible release—albeit a brief one—from the oppressive hold of her life.

7. Conclusion

'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'The Bell Jar' provide profound psychological portraits of women struggling with mental illness, identity, and societal expectations. While Woolf's novel is more subtle in its depiction of psychological distress, Plath's work is more direct and visceral. Both authors, however, use their protagonists' inner lives to comment on broader societal issues, including the roles of women and the ways in which mental illness is misunderstood and often exacerbated by these societal pressures.

Woolf reflects on her battles with mental illness in 'Mrs. Dalloway' by employing Septimus Warren Smith as a metaphor for the atrocities of war and the state of suboptimal mental care. In this novel, Woolf portrays the ineffectiveness of mental care and individual alienation by using PTSD and existential horror in her characters, such as Septimus.

For Clarissa Dalloway, death is both resistance and transformation, a contradictory form of communication with a world that does not speak her language, whereas Esther understands death as an exit from the relentless despair that cannot be overcome. Woolf and Plath's interpretations of female psychological experience serve not only to reveal personal battles but also to underscore larger, more lasting themes about trauma, social expectation, and self-understanding in literature.

Collectively, these works pioneered a new concept of mental health and stimulated further literary investigations into trauma, identity, and socially imposed limitations.

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