

Both protagonists struggle to define themselves in a world that denies the development of the female self. Compare how the authors explore and present the destruction of the self in 'The Bell Jar' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

To be able to survive in a society that has rules, regulations, double standards, emotional and physical constraints one needs to maintain a sense of individuality. To hold a unique identity is the key to achieve others recognition and to have one's thoughts, character and environment understood.

The author, Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman present the destruction of the self by revealing the unnamed woman's and Esther's deteriorating mental stability. In both these two novels we recognise and witness the devastating effects experienced by women who are slowly driven insane by the gender stereotypic confines of their social world. Both of the authors demonstrate that the women in the novels feel oppressed by the obvious social restrictions placed upon women, and undoubtedly these emotional burdens result in not only their social and intellectual deterioration, but also their mental destruction. Throughout the two novels there are examples of how the authors explore and present the protagonists struggle to define themselves in a world that denies the development of the female self and the destruction of the self. Gilman and Plath are trying to convey to their readers that both these women are desperately trying to free themselves from an isolated, controlled domestic and social life. Both women are trapped in a patriarchal society with rigid expectations of women. The cost of going against social norms is isolation, breakdown and the destruction of the self.

The beginnings of the novels immediately reveal to us what kind of society the women lived in. 'The Bell Jar' is set in the 1950's, and through Plath's description of New York, we are given a good reflection of the society at that time. In the first part of this novel when Esther is in New York she is with a whole group of women of the same age. How they are treated and portrayed in the novel presents to the reader what sort of society it was written in. Plath cleverly shows this through her descriptive writing –

“They were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs,
where they had to wear hats and...
waiting to get married to some career man or other...these girls looked awfully bored to
me.”

The few lines above suggests that women in those days were expected to get married and sit at home, and the unusual thing is that women accepted it as “they *were* waiting around to get married...” Esther doesn't want to be like these other women she knows, she doesn't want to be the same or carry the role that 50's America had dictated.

Likewise, in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' on the very first page the unnamed woman voices the societies views and beliefs set in the 1890's. Here we are introduced to John, the unnamed woman's husband and how he behaves and reacts towards her –

“John laughs at me, of course, but *one* expect that in marriage”.

We can already sense what kind of relationship the two have. Seemingly it is one where John doesn't really understand her hence “laughs at her [me]”. The use of the words “one expects” implies that the unnamed woman realises that John is a part of society, and will always fail to understand her, as whatever society thinks and does according to John will be natural. This may suggest why the unnamed woman doesn't really open herself up to anyone.

In the two novels we come across other characters that do not allow the protagonists to grow or for that matter define themselves in the world. The authors have chosen to reveal this aspect and emphasise the destruction of the self.

In 'The Bell Jar' Plath presents a lot more characters that do not allow Esther to find her true identity or realise her true self. One of the characters that restrict Esther is Buddy Willard. We sense that Esther isn't really fond of him from the beginning because she “look down on him” and that she “would never marry him even if he were the last man on earth”. We find that Buddy Willard and Esther's views differ completely. For instance when Buddy Willard asks Esther what a poem is she replies she didn't know. His response was that it is “A piece of dust”. From the beginning of the book we know that Esther is interested in writing–

“ All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing
and working like mad was what I wanted to do”.

Esther rejects the gender norms of the society and instead of waiting to get married and have a family she feels like she will have to suffer the loss of freedom. For this very reason she rejects Buddy Willard and his ideals as she feels that all Buddy wants is a typical family life and wife. Hence by Buddy Willard's remark it is obvious that Esther would not agree as she feels strongly about writing. The important point here is that Buddy does not appreciate the creative process that is highly valued by Esther who wants to be a poet. Instead of telling him what she actually felt she just says, “I guess so” and leaves it at that. But what she really felt like saying was –

“They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem last a whole lot longer
than a hundred of those people put together”.

This presents two sides of Esther, one that doesn't reveal her true self and the other that accepts what she is told – “I took everything Buddy Willard told me as the honest-to-God truth”. Everything that Buddy believed in came from his mother, as he was “amazingly close to his mother”. She represented the stereotypical woman of that time. He was always saying what he was taught by his mother –

“What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security”.

There are a lot of implications throughout the book, not only from Buddy about the traditional, typical role a woman should carry. These we witness through Esther's mother and Buddy's mother Mrs Willard's attitudes.

Buddy Willard repeats what his mother used to tell him and teach him –

“What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman
Is is the place where the arrow shoots off from”.

This quote was the normal attitude to marriage at the time. The language here has a very symbolic and metaphorical meaning parallel to that of men and women's position and significance in society. The man being the “arrow”, an object that moves forward that shoots “into the future” implies that the woman will always be left behind and the man will pursue his dreams. But Esther does not want to have anything to do with it. She states –

“I wanted change and excitement and
to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from
a fourth of July rocket”.

Esther wants to “shoot off in all directions” which reveals that she wants to reach high places in life, has goals and aspirations. This emphasises the fact that she really is against women being forced into stereotypical roles of being housewives but wants to be able to be the arrow herself hence she challenges Mrs Willard's and society's views and traditions. It illustrates that Esther is an *escapee*, but it also symbolises the hope and on a wider scale, the eventual development of the treatment of women in the 1950's in America.

In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ John restricts the unnamed woman to be herself, she, like Esther also likes to write but he doesn't allow her. Her personal view is that she

“believes that congenial work, with excitement and change would
do her [me] good”.

However she is not able to do so as she has been told that she needs total bed rest and that she is to do nothing, total “rest cure”. Hence she emphasises the fact that she needs mental stimulation. Although ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ doesn't have as many characters restricting the protagonist the metaphorical element Gilman includes is just as effective as characters.

It seems Gilman intended the wallpaper to represent the constraints and demand of the home, marriage, motherhood and society, which leads to a sense of isolation and alienation. It seems as though the woman is unable to express herself as she is confined and restricted by the wallpaper. The bedroom walls and the yellow wallpaper physically restrain the unnamed woman- “the pattern is torturing”. Other images that illustrate limits and boundaries are “hedges and walls and gates that lock” highlights the fact that she is trapped. She says –

“At night...[the wallpaper] turns to bars!”

She is imprisoned by the wallpaper, by society's constant suppression of her personal expression. John doesn't want her time spent on thinking and reasoning when she could be doing other less mentally active things, and at this point Gilman makes the readers identify that lack of intellectual stimulation in reality could do more damage than help. This again highlights the creative process and imagination being denied.

The unnamed woman may be confined however Gilman uses contrasted images of the actual room she is confined to. Although everything is rigid, ordered and restrictive like the windows of the nursery are barred and the garden is "full of box-bordered paths" the actual nursery is "a big airy room" that at one time was a "playroom and gymnasium". This reveals to us the apparent freedom one may think they have in society to the actual society it self. It is a contrast between society and stimulation.

Plath's woman, Esther is also confined, but her confinement is more emotional than physical. The title 'The Bell Jar' in itself gives an image of being trapped repressed and restricted. If someone feels this way like Esther, it is obvious that she is being limited in some way or another destroyed as she is unable to express herself and this leads to her being physically and emotionally bruised. The Bell jar actually represents the society and its rules and regulations and Plath is using this metaphorically to reveal that Esther is trapped and is unable to express or be herself. She feels cut off from society and unable to fit in. An example of this is where she reaches for the receiver-

Her hand "retreated and fell limp...as if it had collided with a pane of glass."

This emphasises the image of being trapped in a Bell Jar away from society and feeling isolated from the rest of the world.

Her disconnection is to such an extreme that she detaches herself from her body and does not associate it with herself. At one point of the novel she falls and she describes her physical self as if it were someone else

"It was the sleeve of my own bathroom (indication that she has realised it is herself)...
and my left hand lay pale as a cod at the end of it."

Although Esther isn't able to be herself or express herself due to the restrictions of others, it may seem that Esther herself is unable to define her identity. Throughout the novel she is unsure about her future and about her self. It seems self evident that Esther is deeply unsettled by the hypocritical world and overwhelmed and powerless to break free. Because of this confusion Esther adopts some parts of the personalities of the women in her life, which evidently neither fit nor reflect her true self. By doing this it seems she is trying to fit in but there is a sense of self-destruction as she is confused and unsure of whom she really is. One minute she feels like she wants to be like Doreen, the next she says she is disgusted by her and says, "It was Betsy I resembled at heart". At another point she feels that she wants to be like Jay Cee as her balance of marriage and career impresses her.

Another reason for assuming Esther's confusion is her uncertainty of which path to follow in her life. Esther sees her future as the fig tree as she is unable to choose which branch to follow-

“I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree...
I wanted each and everyone of them, but choosing one meant losing the rest.”

She is unable to choose what it is she wants to do; there is a conflict within her that does not allow her to make *a* decision. Hence she is *unable to define herself* due to her own confusion and uncertainty. Therefore it is true that society denies Esther’s development, but her self-confusion is where the struggle of defining herself begins.

In Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, the woman trapped behind the wallpaper is representative of all women trapped within unfair and oppressive roles that they are supposed to carry out in society. By freeing the woman behind the wallpaper Gilman illustrates that not only is the unnamed woman trying to free herself but also she is freeing everyone.

By the end of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ one could view the protagonist as having freed herself-

“I’ve got out at last...And I’ve pulled off most off the paper,
so you can’t put me back!”

At this point she believes she has escaped and is expressing herself. However it is possible that most of us would think she is totally mad. This is shown through Gilman’s use of language to explain and describe the unnamed woman towards the end. She almost reduces her to an animal as she is “creeping around and she “bit off a little piece [of the bed] at the corner”.

On the other hand ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ could be interpreted to have a positive ending as she feels she has finally set herself free.

Likewise the ending of ‘The Bell Jar’ is also ambiguous. If one were to interpret the novel as having an optimistic finish to support this analysis is her being released from the mental institution-

“ I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a
few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air”.

At first we find that she is trapped in the bell jar “sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air”. The sense of freedom we get from the previous quote may make us believe that she is finally free and has established her identity. However if we were to read between the lines one may come to a different conclusion.

Yes she does say that the bell jar has finally “suspended, a few feet high” and yes she has been released from the mental institution, however the ending is ambiguous.

Firstly the clothes she wears when she is finally set *free* –

“My stocking seams were straight...and my *red* wool suit...”

The red dress may imply danger. It seems as though she has completely changed. Plath describes Esther as a lot more sensuous as the word “red” is used, and Esther is not like that. However the same word might stand for wound, and her going out into the society

may be seen as her being defeated. It could be possible that she has just decided to give up and move on with society and its limitations. She is –

“...Born twice- patched, retreaded and approved for the road”.

The use of the phrase “approved for the road” is an indication suggesting that she society will now approve of her, as she has been made-over.

Hence the use of the word “patch” may suggest that she has covered herself yet again not revealing her true self. In other words she has just escaped from one bell jar to another. She has not freed herself from anything apart from the institution, but what she really wanted was to be free from societal pressures. It seems as though she has decided to conform to the society rules as she has realised the only way to get on with life without going insane is accepting what society throws at you.

The two novels seem to leave an open end for the finality of the stories leaving us to be the judges of whether the protagonists have truly freed themselves from such an oppressive and gender stereotypic society. One may believe that both have liberated themselves from the constraints of their societies however the presentation of it by the two authors, differ.

‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ may give a clear indication that the unnamed woman has reached her goal, to free herself and the other women from the wallpaper. However we still see her in an unstable state of mind. She has practically gone insane, but has succeeded in what she sought out to do.

‘The Bell Jar’ on the other hand may seem like it has a positive ending. However it seems that although Esther hasn’t actually freed herself, and isn’t really herself by the end of the novel, we get a sense that she obviously knows what she is doing as she has “plans”. However she realises that society will not accept her true self hence the masking of her identity.

Both authors explore and present the destruction of the self in varying ways. Gilman uses a metaphorical and psychological dimension to expose the cruel method of treatment and the struggle of the female self to develop.

The novels present the harsh and blunt reality of fixed, socially based gender roles. The period that the women were in, nobody realised how doll-like their lives actually were. Women were like dolls with no identity, made beautiful on the outside and remain empty inside. Esther and the unnamed woman try to fill their hollowness with knowledge and activity, so the can establish a personal, individual and unique identity.

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