The Division of Self in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*

**Introduction**

I would like to research more into the idea of the divided self in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. I am interested in an aspect of the novel that we talked about in class, that Esther is torn within herself and between the personalities of two of her friends, Doreen and Betsy, who embody two different sides of her character. Throughout the novel as Esther delves deeper into herself and her depression, her division of self grows more prominent, starting with her desire to use a fake name and identity and culminating in her attempts to find her identity and heal the division within her at institutions. I think it would be interesting to look into the scholarly work on this subject and see to what extent it has been explored in reference to the effect on just the novel, and also in reference to Plath’s parallel experiences in her own life. In pursuing this topic, I would like to research the degree of Esther’s separation of self, the effects of this on her mental health, the possible causes of this identity crisis, how it is resolved in the novel, and also how this all connects to Plath’s own life. If I were to write an essay on this subject, I might, as my thesis, state that the purpose of the essay is to explore the division of self in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* in relation to the main character, Esther Greenwood, the mirroring of two sides of her character in Doreen and Betsy, and how the division of self effects Esther and Plath both. I found a good amount of journal articles that address this topic, as well as a few books and websites. Through these resources, I hope to refine my ideas about the division of self in the novel and explore the degree to which academics and critics agree or disagree on this topic.

**Annotated Bibliography**


Baerevar’s MA thesis delves deeply into Esther Greenwood’s madness and the possible causes behind it. She especially uses the context of the time and events to suggest that the policies of containment and McCarthyism were factors in Esther’s declining mental health. Using Michel Foucault’s theory of self-policing and the Panopticon, Baerevar explores the idea that Esther, thinking she is always on display and watched, feels torn between acting as her true self and as society expects her to act. Having to subscribe to gender roles and always being under the oppressive male gaze causes dissention within women in general, Baerevar submits. Not only are others always watching Esther, but she is constantly observing herself, Baerevar says, through self-policing. This lack of freedom of behavior is what causes Esther’s breakdown, and is what Baerevar explores in her thesis. This fits in well with the idea of the divided self, since Esther is always having to act to live up to some standards, be it her mothers, her educators, her peers, or her own, and so is torn between her true self and the false self (or selves) she has to present to the public.

Bonds’ article explores the idea of the separatist self in a different way than I imagined it, which is as Esther/Plath’s inability to focus on her true self and instead is torn in half. Bonds’ idea is that the culture of the time forces a separative self onto Esther because as an ambitious, independent woman she is forced into the cultural norm of the submissive, passive woman who serves man. Therefore, her autonomous self and the self she has to be to fit in to society are constantly at war. She argues that each of the paths open to Esther involve leaving out a part of herself, and so she is unable to continue wholeheartedly on one path without creating this division of self. Bonds also brings in the idea that the separate—and bounded—self is like being locked in your own body, thus having two distinct entities just between your own mind and body. She talks about the integration of Esther’s different “selves” into the women around her, like Doreen and Dr. Nolan and Joan Gilling. Lastly, Bonds argues that it is the separation not just of self, but from others, that leads to Esther’s breakdown.


This study takes Plath’s Smith Journals and analyzes them for metaphors of motion and metaphors of the conflicted self. This brings more depth to my research on the division of self in *The Bell Jar*; as a mostly autobiographical work, looking more into the division of self in Plath’s own life is relevant. Demjen explores the different ways that Plath describes her conflicted selves in her journals. Sometimes she refers to them explicitly, saying that her “stubborn self” or “honest self” feel differently. Other times, her metaphors about irreconcilable parts of her character or the loss of unity she feels within herself underline this lack of a single self. This is a very interesting resource since it documents Plath’s own feelings around the time of the events she wrote about in *The Bell Jar* (1950-1953) and parallels so well with the feelings she attributes Esther with as well. This division of self, as shown in her writings, goes hand in hand with her suicidal tendencies and can also be traced back to discrepancies between her private and public selves.


Eder’s article is a review of the book *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* by Anne Stevenson. As it would take too long for me to read the biography, I took a look at this review to see if the book could add more to the idea of the divided self not only in Plath’s works, but her life. Eder states that Stevenson “embraces conflicting aspects of Plath without denying any of them,” suggesting that this division of self is something that contemporaries and peers noticed in Plath, and an aspect of Plath that we see in the testimonies of these people. Eder and Stevenson submit that Plath was constantly going back and forth between energized agency and depressed stasis. The *Ariel* poems, they say, show that she had both an attraction to and fear of “non-being.” Plath’s relationship with her mother also added to Plath’s divisive nature, as Aurelia Plath expected much of her daughter and Plath struggled to live up to it. Even the nature of Plath’s writings shows her divisiveness; she wanted to write successfully but also write great works, and so submitted things to both magazines like *Seventeen* and literary magazines. All of these examples that Eder gives in her review integrate the idea of Plath’s divided self.

This webpage explores the division of self not in The Bell Jar, but in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. The author plays with the idea that Plath was not writing about the divisive self because of some sort of psychosis, but because of “folk-tale, literature, and myth” –that the image of the divided self comes from the idea of a doppelganger. This page insists that the struggle between the double and its origin is at the heart of much of Plath’s poetry, as well as the desire for the true self to shed its shell. She brings in the fact that Plath studied the double in Dostoevsky for her undergraduate thesis to support this claim, as well as her knowledge of folk-tales, psychology, and myth. This is an interesting take on Plath, since most of the other resources I’ve found have related the division of self directly and only to her mental state and schizophrenia.


Starting with the question of “why is this novel so compelling?” Perloff submits that it is not because it documents the mental breakdown of a “brilliant, beautiful” girl as the dust jacket suggests, but because it follows the very relatable experience of a young woman casting off the different identities society forces on her to become her true self. Noticing Esther’s division of self in the beginning of the novel, as when she says “I heard myself say,” Perloff then goes on to relay the different masks Esther wears for the possible female role models in her life, from her mother to Doreen to Betsy, and then to why none of these women can be her role model. Esther does not need to become somebody else, she needs to become herself, Perloff argues. Her essay presents the notion that every woman of this time felt conflicted, that as there were now many different roles for women, though none clearly defined, women had trouble choosing one. With all of these possible selves, and with society and peers shoving the different identities at them, how were they supposed to be their real selves? Finally Perloff suggests that without realizing the separation within oneself, one cannot hope to ultimately find unity within the self. Overall, her essay is a great resource on this subject, though it explores not just the division of self in Esther or Plath, but the division of self in all women (especially of this time), and the causes and consequences of it.


Smith’s article draws on the uncertainty of the ‘50s and the conflicting messages society often sent to women. Using examples from Mademoiselle magazine where Plath had the summer internship that she based the events of Esther’s internship at Ladies’ Day on, Smith shows the discrepancies between what the magazine was trying to say and what it was really saying. The article titles may have allowed women readers to think that they had choices, but the text beneath them actually showed that being anything but the prescribed social norm of a homemaker, wife, and mother was all but impossible. These conflicting messages led to confusion in the young lady readers and created a division of self due to the want to be a career woman and the pressure to stay in the home. Smith asserts that while magazines like this had the façade of uplifting the
independent, successful woman, they really discouraged any sort of role outside of the private sphere women were still tied to.


This article submits *The Bell Jar* as a very conventional bildungsroman, indicated by the guidelines outlined by Jerome Buckley: growing up and gradual self-discovery, alienation, the conflict of generation, and the search for a vocation. These all apply to *The Bell Jar* very well, and we talked about its place as an example of bildungsroman in class. However, seeing these integral elements of a bildungsroman made me realize the connection between the bildungsroman and the division of self. All of these elements are also what contribute to said division in the novel; Esther is isolated, trying to find her true self, forced into conflicting roles by the older generations and a more progressive society, and she is trying to find the vocation that fits with her actual self. Wagner’s essay deals with many of the ideas I am looking at in this research: the multiple role models, the conflicting roles and desires, the lack of control. In this way I think that imagining the novel as a bildungsroman is important to understanding the divisive self motif.


Whittier’s essay focuses on Esther’s ability to see the hypocrisy and divisiveness in the world as what leads to her insanity. “The intellectual or creative woman,” she suggests, “must divide, and is already divided by her society into incompatible selves or half-selves.” This, I think, is an interesting idea to consider in the divisive self in *The Bell Jar* because most other resources have suggested that yes, some of the reason Esther’s divisiveness occurs is because of outside forces and society’s expectations, but generally concede that most of the problem is internal- her inability to reconcile the conflicting selves. What Whittier suggests is that until Esther can see the conflicting things as one, she cannot get better. She also explores the many doubles that Esther has, usually described as projections of her different selves onto others. Buddy is representative of the life she could have as wife and mother; Doreen, the seductive woman; Betsy, the good girl. Esther’s primary identity of the intellectual woman is already contradictory in society’s terms, and so Esther is a living paradox, the disharmony and confusion of which leads to her depression and insanity. An interesting idea that Whittier brings up in this article is that while other women have the ability to embrace their duality and inherent doubleness, Esther has the unique ability to see the doubleness without the ability to be double.


Winder’s book gives an inside look to the events in Plath’s life that served as inspiration for *The Bell Jar*. Reading this book makes you realize that Plath’s real-life experiences very closely mirrored what she wrote in her novel, and that she only really changed names and details in order to fictionalize that summer as an intern at a fashion magazine in New York. This book allows you to follow the division of self Plath was feeling and then relate it to how she portrays these
feelings with Esther. Torn between wanting to do well and be successful and wanting to be liked and admired by the other girls, Plath’s summer living in the Barbizon with the other girls, her first time away from home, serves as a fulcrum in her shifting sides of self. Trying to fit in with the new idea of “urban femininity,” and trying to live up to the high potential expected of her, Plath and her fictionized parallel, Esther, experienced the most division of self in this period.

Conclusion

Researching this topic allowed me to delve farther into what the division of self means for Plath and her novel, and also the symbolism in her novel of this division. Overall, this research led me to realize that my initial thesis was too constricted, that it is not only within herself and between Doreen and Betsy that Esther is divided, but within many other aspects as well. The division of self also means the loss of self, which I see through Bonds’ article and the image of mirrors, showing Esther’s many faces back at her, none that she sees as her true identity. It also means the confliction within all women at this time, trying to deal with the multiple roles being prescribed for them through society and media, as both Perloff’s and Smith’s articles suggest. Whittier’s essay also brings in the idea that while all women are forced into this division of self, Esther has the ability to see it but not deal with it, leading to her breakdown. All of these resources helped me to realize that while mental instability and recovery are themes of the novel, at the heart of all that is the idea of the division of self – that is what leads to Esther’s insanity and only by reconciling these selves can she hope to get better. I have read this book a few times before and always enjoyed it, but I think that this research has led me to understand it much better. Esther’s division of self, between the high expectations, forced roles, and contradictory messages, explains her mental breakdown. Understanding more of Plath’s own life and the time when this occurred also brings fresh perspective that I would not have had otherwise, and which allows me to appreciate the novel even more as a story not just of a young woman going crazy, as it is often reduced to, but a bildungsroman of a young woman trying to cast off societal expectations and become her true self. If I were to continue with this topic in a paper, I would change my thesis to reflect my expanded views of the subject, and I would then try to organize my research so that it flowed from one idea to the next, maybe placing articles that dealt with Plath’s life as one topic, those that dealt with Esther’s doubles in another, and then combine the others that talk of the outside influences that led to this division of self. My thesis might then state something like: This paper attempts to look within the division of self in Esther Greenwood and The Bell Jar by first exploring the division of self in Plath that led to this autobiographical novel, then the many and varied doubles Esther projects her conflicting selves onto, and finally the outside influences of the time and society that led to this division of self, why, and the consequences of it. That, I believe, is a much tighter thesis statement that allows use of all of the resources I found and ties them together to present a view of the novel that traces the division of self and the very integral importance of this motif in understanding Plath, Esther, and the novel as a whole.