



## THE ROLE OF MENTAL ILLNESS AS A METAPHOR FOR GENDERED OPPRESSION IN THE BELL JAR AND THE AWAKENING

Shoymardonova Gulandom Elbek kizi

Master student of Asian University of Technologies;  
Karshi, Kashkadarya, Uzbekistan;  
tel:+998996259066;  
e-mail: shoymardonovagulandom01@gmail.com  
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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the role of mental illness as a metaphor for gendered oppression in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Using feminist literary criticism, the study analyzes how psychological distress in both protagonists—Esther Greenwood and Edna Pontellier—reflects the internalization of patriarchal constraints. These novels do not merely depict mental illness as individual pathology but frame it as symptomatic of broader sociocultural limitations imposed on women. The study employs close textual analysis of metaphor, character development, and narrative structure to demonstrate how mental illness functions as both a critique of and response to gender norms. Findings suggest that both novels metaphorically portray female mental collapse as a form of resistance to societal expectations and a desperate grasp at personal autonomy..*

### 1. Introduction

Literary portrayals of women's psychological distress have long been influenced by societal perceptions of femininity and mental illness. In patriarchal societies, women's refusal to conform to social norms has often been pathologized, with mental illness used both as diagnosis and metaphor (Showalter, 1985). Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* offer potent explorations of this dynamic through their respective protagonists: Esther Greenwood and Edna Pontellier.

This paper explores how mental illness in these two novels operates as a metaphor for gendered oppression. While Esther is institutionally diagnosed with depression and subjected to psychiatric treatment, Edna's emotional turmoil—though not explicitly labeled as mental illness—manifests as psychological rebellion against the limitations of womanhood. The metaphors of the bell jar and the sea respectively represent the psychological and societal pressures women endure in their pursuit of selfhood (Plath, 1963; Chopin, 1899).

### 2. Methods

This study uses qualitative literary analysis based on **feminist literary criticism**, focusing on how the texts represent women's mental health as shaped by external social

structures.

### **Primary Sources**

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

The Awakening by Kate Chopin

### **Secondary Sources**

Feminist theory texts, including Showalter (1985), Gilbert & Gubar (1979), and Chesler (1972)

Scholarly articles on mental illness metaphors in literature (de Villiers, 2019; Collman, 2016; Gazairi, 2024)

Close reading was conducted with emphasis on:

Symbolic imagery (e.g., bell jar, sea)

Character psychology and narrative voice

Interactions with male figures and institutions

Societal and medical language used around “madness”

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. The Bell Jar: Confinement, Madness, and Metaphorical Suffocation**

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's mental illness is inextricable from the pressures she faces as a woman in 1950s America. The metaphor of the bell jar encapsulates her suffocating psychological state:

"Wherever I sat... I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (Plath, 1963, p. 185).

This metaphor does more than describe depression—it illustrates how societal constraints on women's identity create emotional suffocation. As de Villiers (2019) notes, Plath rejects patriarchal metaphors of madness by creating her own imagery, which both articulates and critiques Esther's entrapment.

Esther is caught between opposing expectations: to be sexually modest yet attractive, intelligent yet submissive. These contradictions drive her inner collapse. The psychiatric system—represented by electroconvulsive therapy and indifferent male doctors—does not heal but rather enforces conformity (Gazairi, 2024). Her breakdown becomes a symbol of protest against rigid gender norms.

#### **3.2. The Awakening: Repression, Desire, and Emotional Dissociation**

While not diagnosed with mental illness, Edna Pontellier's transformation in *The Awakening* exhibits signs of emotional crisis that society perceives as instability. She becomes distant from her husband and children, pursues artistic freedom, and begins an extramarital affair—all seen as moral failings within her context (Chopin, 1899).

The sea is Chopin's central metaphor for Edna's psychological transformation:

"The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering... inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (Chopin, 1899, p. 15).

As Collman (2016) argues, Edna's ultimate decision to drown herself can be interpreted not merely as suicide but as a symbolic escape from patriarchal containment. Her internal unrest is pathologized by male figures like Dr. Mandelet, who refers to her disobedience as an “odd mood” rather than acknowledging her existential crisis.

### **4. Discussion**

#### **4.1. Mental Illness as a Gendered Metaphor**

Both novels demonstrate how mental illness serves not as isolated pathology but as a metaphor for the psychic toll of female subjugation. Showalter (1985) highlights how women's madness in literature is often a coded rebellion against repression. Esther's bell jar and Edna's ocean are both symbols of their emotional alienation and resistance.

Plath's and Chopin's characters reject traditional roles—wife, mother, caretaker—and suffer mentally for doing so. Yet their mental states are not mere illness: they are socially induced traumas rooted in structural inequality.

#### **4.2. Patriarchal Institutions and the Pathologization of Female Disobedience**

In both narratives, men respond to female disobedience by diagnosing it. Esther is institutionalized; Edna is observed and quietly judged. Their emotional distress is not understood as rational, but as evidence of mental dysfunction. As Chesler (1972) argues, women who reject their roles are often labeled "mad" by the very systems that marginalize them.

De Villiers (2019) and Gazairi (2024) both argue that *The Bell Jar* critiques psychiatric power and its alignment with patriarchal control. Similarly, Collman (2016) interprets Dr. Mandelet's observations in *The Awakening* as an example of how patriarchal logic medicalizes feminine resistance.

#### **4.3. Collapse as Resistance or Liberation?**

Esther and Edna take different paths—Esther survives, Edna does not. But both breakdowns carry metaphorical weight. For Esther, the bell jar may lift but still lingers—a sign that the pressures remain unresolved (Plath, 1963). For Edna, suicide represents ultimate refusal, albeit tragic. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) see this as the "double-bind" for women in patriarchal texts: to conform is to vanish; to rebel is to self-destruct.

Both characters' mental states can thus be read not only as symptoms but as critiques: articulations of what happens when women try to forge independent identities in a world that denies them.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In *The Bell Jar* and *The Awakening*, mental illness serves as a metaphor for gendered oppression. Esther and Edna's psychological suffering is not purely personal—it reflects the broader social systems that define, confine, and diagnose femininity. These novels reveal how women's resistance to traditional roles is often medicalized and punished.

Plath and Chopin expose the cost of womanhood in their respective eras and underscore the need for greater autonomy, understanding, and language outside the constraints of patriarchy. Their metaphors—the bell jar and the sea—remain powerful symbols of both confinement and longing for liberation.

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